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# Warriors: Falling Petals

Flowerkit has always been scorned and teased by the other kits. He hates it. It wasn't his fault that his mother gave him a she-cat's name.

In his quest to prove himself to the other kits, Flowerkit finds himself going down some dangerous paths. As he grows older, he's straying from his destiny, and this time no one can stop him.

*"Under the cover of darkness...*
*Blood-red petals will fall..."*

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# Chapter One - Seeds of Hate

[image]

**Chapter One**
**Seeds of Hate**

"Flowerkit! Flowerkit! Fragile as a flower-kit!"

"Cut it out!" Flowerkit snapped to the brown tabby cat that faced him, jeering. The tom, Spikekit, was only older than Flowerkit by half a moon, but took every possible opportunity to tease and bully him. Not that he was the only one.

"Why? Can't take a bit of pressure, little flower?" the tabby sneered.

"I am *not a flower!"* Flowerkit screamed. He pushed off his back paws and launched himself at Spikekit, grabbing the tom by the shoulders and bowling him over. Spikekit hissed and caught Flowerkit's chest with a hind paw, then flung him away with a powerful kick of his legs.

Flowerkit tumbled onto the ground, rolling to avoid injury. He pushed himself to his paws, turning to fight, but Spikekit was already on him. The larger tabby pinned Flowerkit to the ground and dug his claws into his shoulders. Flowerkit stifled a cry of pain.

"Beg, Flowerkit," Spikekit sneered into Flowerkit's ear. "Plead for mercy."

"Never!" Flowerkit yowled, managing to get his paws under him. He couldn't rise under Spikekit's weight, but with a growl he tossed himself sideways, then used the momentum to roll over, squishing Spikekit under him. The bullying tom let out a furious snarl as the air was pressed out of him. Flowerkit felt the claws in his fur relax their grip and wasted no time in ripping himself away.

"What is going on here?" a loud, shrilly voice demanded. Flowerkit flattened his ears and looked up to see Aspenfall striding towards

them. He groaned inwardly.

"Were you two fighting with your claws again? How many times do I have to tell you to keep them sheathed while playing? Sooner or later one of you is going to get hurt!" the queen shrieked. Flowerkit glowered sideways at Spikekit, blaming him for the queen's fury that was now directed at them. The stupid tabby kit always had to goad him on! And he noticed with irritation the tufts of his own black fur hooked on Spikekit's claws, who hadn't even bothered getting to his feet and lay there on his back like the cowering kitten he was.

"Spikekit, I can't believe you. I haven't raised you to be like this. And Flowerkit! I'm disappointed. I'm sure your mother is too."

Flowerkit bit back an angry retort. No good ever came from arguing with Aspenfall. The tabby queen eyed them for a long moment, evidently deliberating whether to reprimand them more. But Flowerkit was spared further humiliation by the arrival of a older dark gray she-cat.

"Ashenbird! I'm glad you're here. These two have been fighting with their claws again!" Aspenfall's voice was filled with indignation and disdain.

Ashenbird gazed at the two kits, then gestured to Flowerkit with her tail. "Come, Flowerkit," she mewed gently, and turned away to walk towards the bramble wall of the nursery. Flowerkit sighed and trailed after his mother, looking back to shoot Spikekit one last glare.

Alone inside the dim nursery, Ashenbird turned to Flowerkit with a slight frown. "I don't understand, Flowerkit," she meowed quietly. "Why must you always fight with the other kits?"

"It's them, not me!" Flowerkit insisted. "They tease me all the time. Why did you have to name me Flowerkit? I'm not a she-cat!"

Ashenbird lowered her gaze. "I'm sorry, Flowerkit. I know it's hard

for you. But you must learn to ignore the others. They do it only to make you angry, to get you to attack them. Simple minds are satisfied by simple means, my dear kit."

Flowerkit shuffled his paws. He knew this. Ashenbird had told him many times already. But it was so annoying! Hot anger rushed through him at the thought of the jeers and taunts the other kits threw at him. "It's not fair!" he cried.

Ashenbird drew her fluffy tail around her son, pulling him close. "I know, dear one. I know. But you are strong. Stronger than them."

*Stronger than them,* Flowerkit thought. He smiled a little. He knew that, too. He wasn't a simple mind. He was worth more than all the other kits put together!

"Are you alright now, little one? You should go find someone to play with." She thought for a moment. "Sagepaw is always kind to you."

Flowerkit snorted. "I don't need her sympathy."

Ashenbird smiled slightly. "Perhaps not, but everyone needs a friend. Go on."

"Alright," Flowerkit sighed. He shook out his pure black fur, then slipped out of the nursery. He braced himself to ignore Spikekit if the tom was still there, waiting for him.

As he emerged into the clearing, blinking in the renewed light of the sun, Flowerkit scowled. Of course Spikekit was still there, with two other kits besides. One of them noticed him immediately.

"Hey Flowerkit! I hear you got rescued by Ashenbird again! What are you, a newborn? Still need your mother, little flower?"

Flowerkit steeled himself against their words, keeping his eyes on the ground in front of his paws as he stalked past them. But there was no easy way out.

"Come on, Flowerkit!" Mosskit cut in front of him. "Why so quiet?"

Mosskit was currently the only she-kit in the Thunderclan nursery, and she was five moons old to Flowerkit's three. The dark ginger tabby stared down at him with piercing green eyes and a smirk on her face.

Flowerkit flattened his ears and sidestepped to walk around her, but Mosskit moved to block him again.

"Get out of my way, Mosskit," Flowerkit growled softly, his ears flattened.

"Why? Are you going to make me?"

By now the other two kits, Spikekit and a golden tom named Acornkit, had wandered over and the three had him surrounded.

"Yeah, Flowerkit," Acornkit meowed. "Make us."

Flowerkit growled under his breath. "I don't have to. I'm worth more than all of you put together!"

"Right," Mosskit laughed. "And what makes you think that? You're just a kitten. A weak, fragile little flower."

"Am *not!*" Flowerkit snarled, sliding out his claws. They dug into the soft earth under him.

"Really?" Mosskit meowed, the annoying smug look on her face spreading into a leer. "Prove it."

Flowerkit tensed his muscles. If a fight was what she wanted, a fight was what she would get! But his attention was drawn by the slight movements of the toms on either side of him as they, too, unsheathed their claws. There was no way Flowerkit could fight all three of them.

The black kit lifted his chin and looked Mosskit squarely in the eye. "Prove it how? You act like you want me to fight you, but three against one isn't fair at all. That just proves how much of a coward you are."

Mosskit's eyes flashed. Her tail lashed. She looked like she was

about to claw him anyway, but then she relaxed a little, the smirk returning.

"Of course not by fighting," Mosskit purred. "That wouldn't work for you anyway, since you're so small. I could crush you with a paw. But why don't we give you a little test, something that would *really* prove your bravery, little flower?"

Flowerkit glared. "Like what?"

Mosskit purred silkily. "Like stealing prey from Shadowclan's camp."

He heard muted gasps from Spikekit and Acornkit, and Flowerkit's own amber eyes widened with shock. Steal from another Clan? There was no way.

"Or are you too scared?" Mosskit asked with a snicker.

Rage swept over Flowerkit, and he said the words without thinking.

"No. I'll do it."

# Chapter Two - The Quest to Prove

[image]

**Chapter Two**
**The Quest to Prove**

For the rest of the day, Flowerkit was nervous. He couldn't believe he was actually going to try and steal from another Clan. ShadowClan, no less! There was no way he could succeed. Yet he had to try. If he didn't... There would never be an end to the bullying.

Mosskit, Acornkit and Spikekit had left him alone after he'd agreed to their test. They were still watching him, though. He glanced over at the group of kits by the nursery, and Mosskit noticed his gaze and shot him a mocking smile before returning her attention to Acornkit and Spikekit. The three were deep in conversation. Flowerkit sighed and walked on.

He was heading towards the freshkill pile, but before he reached it another cat jumped in front of him in a flash of brown fur. Flowerkit arched his back and bared his teeth, thinking it was Spikekit, but quickly realized the cat in front of him was not a tabby, and was too big to be another kit. "Sagepaw!" Flowerkit cried in both relief and irritation.

"Hey Flowerkit," the pretty brown and white she-cat meowed. "Are you alright? I saw that Mosskit and the others had you cornered."

"I'm fine," Flowerkit huffed. Anxiety clenched his stomach as he was reminded of the mission he had taken on. "N-nothing happened."

Sagepaw blinked her pale green eyes and shook out her fur. "Alright. You know, if you ever want me to teach those bullies a lesson, just ask."

"Right," Flowerkit grumbled, but immediately disregarded her offer. He didn't need anyone to come to his rescue.

"Do you want to play something?" Sagepaw asked. "My mentor's out on patrol, so I have nothing to do." She scuffed her paws and sighed in pretend boredom.

Flowerkit laughed at her dramatics. "Sure, let's play," he meowed, beginning to feel himself cheer up. "You good with mossball?"

"Absolutely." Sagepaw smiled. "I'm not going easy on you this time, though."

"Hey, I'm only three moons," Flowerkit replied, scooping up a pawful of moss and squishing it into a roughly circular shape. He tossed it in the air to check that it kept its form, then batted it over to Sagepaw.

Sagepaw snagged it in her claws and threw it back over to him. "So what?"

Flowerkit jumped and caught the mossball in his jaws. He dropped it and kicked it back over, and didn't reply, concentrating on the game. Sagepaw swiped it back. The ball of moss went over Flowerkit's head. He turned and grabbed it, then flung it at Sagepaw as fast as he could. The apprentice caught it easily. She threw it again, but this time it fell short of Flowerkit, who was expecting another long throw. He growled and hit it again. The mossball went sideways, and Sagepaw had to run over to get it.

"Sorry," Flowerkit grunted, but Sagepaw just smiled and batted it back.

After a few more passes, Flowerkit grew bored. The worry gnawing inside him was making it difficult to enjoy the game. He kicked the mossball back at Sagepaw and shook his head. "I'm getting a bit tired. I think I'm going to take a nap," he told her. Sagepaw nodded.

"Okay. I'll see you later then." Sagepaw flung the mossball into the bushes, where it disappeared with a rustle of leaves. Then she touched Flowerkit's shoulder with her tail and smiled. "Don't let the

other kits get to you. You have a great name. They're just a bunch of mouse-brains."

"Yeah, whatever," Flowerkit grumbled. He'd heard it all before. He turned and headed back towards the nursery.

The other kits had started a game of their own, and Rainkit, Spikekit's brother, had joined them. The four kits were split up in teams of two according to kin; Spikekit and Rainkit were facing off with Mosskit and Acornkit. It looked like each team had an object they were guarding. On Mosskit and Acornkit's side there was a feather, and Rainkit and Spikekit protected a pinecone. Each team was trying to get the other team's treasure without losing their own. As Flowerkit watched, Mosskit pushed Rainkit down and grabbed the pinecone in her jaws. Spikekit looked over from where he was circling Acornkit, who was guarding the feather, and Acornkit pinned the younger tom. Mosskit then ran over and set the pinecone down beside their feather, proclaiming, "We win!"

Flowerkit felt a twang of jealousy. Their game looked a lot more fun than mossball. He continued on to the nursery, ignoring Spikekit's cries of "No fair! You're bigger than us. We should switch teams!"

Ashenbird was sitting in front of the nursery entrance, and looked down in surprise when Flowerkit padded up to her. "What is it, Flowerkit?" his mother asked.

"I'm just going to take a nap," Flowerkit mumbled.

Ashenbird frowned. "Alright. Don't sleep too long, though, or you won't be able to fall asleep tonight."

Flowerkit nodded and slipped past her, wishing things were still that simple. But tonight he would be in ShadowClan territory, and he would need to be rested for that. Flowerkit found his nest in the dim nursery and curled up. It took a while, but finally he drifted asleep.

When Flowerkit woke, orange rays of sunlight slanted into the den at a low angle. It was almost sunset. Yawning, Flowerkit got to his feet. All too soon, his worry returned to him. Flowerkit took a deep

breath. Fretting wouldn't help him steal prey. Once he was sure he could act normal, Flowerkit wandered out of the den.

"You're awake, finally," Ashenbird meowed. She had a small thrush in front of her. "I thought you might be hungry."

Flowerkit nodded, giving her a sheepish smile when his stomach rumbled audibly. Ashenbird purred in amusement and gestured him over.

Flowerkit ate slowly, watching as the ThunderClan warriors gradually started finishing up the day's activity. Multiple cats had prey and were eating their evening meal, or were chatting with other warriors and sharing tongues. A group of warriors came in through the camp entrance, evidently having finished a border patrol. Sprucestar, ThunderClan's leader, was watching over the camp from the Highledge.

Flowerkit looked up when Mosskit and Acornkit padded over to him. "Ready for this, little flower?" Mosskit purred as she approached. "Remember, we'll be waiting for you when you get back... Do you think he'll really be able to steal something, Acornkit?" she asked her brother.

The golden tom shook his head. "No way. He's way too weak."

"Don't talk like I'm not here," Flowerkit snapped. "I will too get something. You'll see."

"Maybe," Mosskit laughed. "I won't get my hopes up."

"Hopes up? You're *hoping* that I'll fail, or come back without trying," Flowerkit hissed furiously. "But I won't. I'm not weak or a coward!"

"Not so loud," Mosskit meowed, rolling her eyes. "Do you want the warriors to clue in? Hoping you'll get rescued before it's begun?"

"No," Flowerkit growled, somewhat quieter. He got up and stalked away, leaving behind his unfinished thrush.

Later that night, when all of the other kits and queens were asleep in their nests, Mosskit came over and nudged Flowerkit. No words

were exchanged. Flowerkit slowly got out of his nest, careful not to wake Ashenbird, who was curled up beside him. He stood.

"See you in morning, Flowerkit," Mosskit meowed, her voice a mocking whisper. She obviously didn't expect him to succeed. Flowerkit stifled a hiss and slipped out of the nursery.

Outside, the camp was eerily quiet. It was only claw-moon, so the night was dark. Flowerkit shivered.

There was no sign of other cats, but Flowerkit was pretty sure there would be a guard posted outside the hollow. Maybe he could sneak past whoever it was. After all, he was still small, and his pelt was black. Flowerkit steered his paws toward the path that led out of camp.

It was a bit challenging to climb up the rocky slope without making any noise, and Flowerkit constantly feared that someone would glance out from their den and see him completely exposed against the stone. But he made it to the top of the hollow without incident.

At the top, Flowerkit immediately darted under a bush, keeping low and silent. He crouched there for a long moment, heart pounding. Nothing happened. Flowerkit dared peek up, and he saw the gray pelt of a warrior - but the warrior wasn't looking at him. The tom was sitting, facing away from him, and was completely oblivious to his presence. Flowerkit held back a relieved laugh. The guard was watching for enemies approaching the camp, not cats sneaking out of it! Flowerkit quietly started moving off in another direction.

The guard looked familiar, but Flowerkit couldn't recognize him by name. He almost believed that he would actually get away from the warrior without trouble when he accidentally stepped on a fallen leaf. The dead leaf made an unbearably loud crackle. Flowerkit jumped back, startled, and brushed against the full branches of the bush he cowered against, making more rustling noises. Flowerkit froze, his heart beating in his ears.

"Who's there?" the guard called out. Flowerkit remained silent, shrinking as much as he could. The gray warrior took a few paces, scanning the area, and sniffed at the air. Then he walked back to his

spot, muttering, "Dumb birds."

Flowerkit slowly relaxed his muscles, and finally continued on, being more cautious than ever as to where he was putting his paws. It seemed to take a long time, but finally the guard was out of sight.

Flowerkit smiled and quickened his pace a little bit, less worried now about making noise. He only took two pawsteps before freezing again.

He didn't know where ShadowClan was.

Flowerkit had only been out of camp once before, and even then all he had done was climb out of the hollow and look around before Ashenbird had taken him back down. He had no idea where the border was, or even if ThunderClan shared a border with ShadowClan!

No, that wasn't true, Flowerkit reflected. He'd heard border patrols talk about the ShadowClan border before, so the two clans must share one. But he didn't know what direction it was in. And even if he got into ShadowClan territory, how would he find their camp? If it was in a hollow like ThunderClan's camp, would he be able to find the entrance without falling into the hollow, possibly to his death? The ThunderClan walls were really high on one side.

Flowerkit shook off his doubts. He *had* to do this. He needed to prove to everyone that he wasn't fragile, or weak, or a coward! Flowerkit took a deep breath, telling himself to be brave.

The first problem he needed to face was finding the ShadowClan border. Once he got there he could worry about the other stuff. Flowerkit took a moment to think.

Ashenbird had told him once about the other three Clans. He remembered her saying that ShadowClan's forest was mostly pines, and that their territory was darker than the other ones because the pines didn't let as much light touch the ground. So he just had to find the pine forest.

But what would he do? Just wander around until he found pine

trees? That could take all night, and there was no guarantee he would even find them. There had to be a better way.

The lake! Suddenly Flowerkit remembered. There was a lake, which was like a gigantic puddle, that was in the center of the four territories. Ashenbird had said that you could see all the territories from the shore. So he just had to find the lake, and look for pines from the shore. That was way easier. Now he just had to find the lake.

Flowerkit knew that water, when it puddled in the camp after a rainfall, always went to the lowest point. So if he could follow the gentle slope of the ground, maybe that would take him to the big puddle. Flowerkit grinned and bounded onward.

The forest was huge. Before long Flowerkit's paws hurt from walking. But he could smell the water, and that gave him hope. He quickened his pace.

Suddenly there were no more trees in front of him. Flowerkit gasped. There was *so much water.*

He could barely see the opposite side of the lake, a smudge of color in the distance. Low waves lapped gently against the shore. The lake was smooth and glossy, black with the reflection of the stars in the sky. The sky was huge, too. From the camp hollow, there was only a piece of sky visible. The rest was blocked by trees. But here, out from the cover of the forest, it seemed like an endless expanse dotted with stars. Flowerkit stood for a moment, just looking at the scene. The mental picture of a 'large puddle' had not prepared him at all.

Finally he knew he had to get a move on if he were to complete his quest before sunrise. By now he was excited. He had already seen much more of the territories than Mosskit had ever seen! And he would get to see even more. Flowerkit scanned the shore.

To one side, the trees began to thin until they stopped altogether. There the land sloped away in gentle hills, open to the sky. Flowerkit shivered. that was probably Windclan territory. He wondered how they could live without the cover of trees.

On the other side, the forest continued, but the trees over there were darker green, their tops pointed rather than branching into the sky. Shadowclan's pines! They were farther away than he thought they would be. Flowerkit shook his head. He might as well get on with it.

The kit walked along the shore of the lake, staying in the open so that he could see the pine forest and know he was going the right way. As he walked, they didn't seem to be getting any closer. And he hadn't smelled any border markers either. Flowerkit growled. His breathing was becoming labored and his paws ached. He had never walked this far before.

He debated going back. Maybe if he could catch something along the way, he could lie and say he took it from Shadowclan. Except he didn't know how to hunt. And there was no way he would return empty-pawed, so he had to keep going.

He passed a couple pines among the oaks and beeches. Flowerkit worried he had missed the border. Were the trees supposed to mix like that? Was he already in Shadowclan territory?

Suddenly he came up upon a large stream. Strong Thunderclan scents lined the river's edge. Was this the border? Flowerkit sniffed. He could smell other scents, too, that weren't Thunderclan, from the other side of the stream. It had to be the border.

Flowerkit frowned. He hadn't expected the barrier between the two clans to be a river. How was he supposed to cross over? He supposed a grown cat could jump the distance, but he was nowhere near fully grown yet. He doubted he would make it. There must be an easier way to cross somewhere, Flowerkit thought, beginning to pad along the edge of the stream. Nothing came into view. He would have to jump.

Flowerkit went back to the spot where the distance between the banks of the river was the shortest. He backed up a bit to give himself a running start.

He didn't give himself any time to think it over. Flowerkit ran the few paces, then when there wasn't enough solid ground to take

another step, he pushed off of his hind legs and threw himself into the air. There was a heartbeat where he hung, suspended, over the moving water, then his front paws hit the ground. But his back paws dangled over the river.

Flowerkit squealed. Fear rushed through him like adrenaline, and he scrabbled at the edge with his hind claws, dragging himself up with his front ones. A moment later he was flopped down on the ground, on the other side of the river. Flowerkit lay there a few moments, panting. He had made it. Barely.

When he had caught his breath again, Flowerkit got to his feet. Unfamiliar scents bombarded him, and he wrinkled his nose in distaste. These must be the Shadowclan markers. They sure smelled!

A small thrill of pride ran through him. He was on Shadowclan territory. No one could say he wasn't brave now. And the woods were quiet; it seemed unlikely that any enemy warriors would find him. All he had to do now was find the Shadowclan camp, slip past the guard, take the prey and get back to his own camp. It didn't seem so daunting to him now. He'd made it this far, hadn't he?

Flowerkit sniffed the air, then regretted breathing in the strong Shadowclan scents. The real problem now would be finding their camp. It could be anywhere in the territory. Flowerkit sighed. He'd better start looking.

Flowerkit made his way purposefully through the pine forest. It was different from walking in ThunderClan territory. The forest floor was covered in needles rather than dead leaves, and though sometimes the needles pricked his pads, they didn't make as much sound when stepped on. New confidence buoyed Flowerkit's step.

Not too much later that confidence was lost. The ShadowClan camp was nowhere to be found. Flowerkit switched directions often, sometimes circling areas that could be possible camp locations. He was getting tired, and his muscles ached. What if he couldn't find the camp at all? Could he still make it back to ThunderClan before daybreak? Flowerkit had lost a lot of precious time wandering unfamiliar territory. Ashenbird would notice he was missing if he wasn't there when she woke. The other kits would be waiting for

him too. Maybe they would assume he'd gotten lost. Maybe he *was* lost. Could he even find his way back home from here?

Suddenly he smelled ShadowClan again. The scents were strong, more than just the lingering smell all through the forest, and panic fluttered in Flowerkit's chest. Had he gone all this way just to be back at the border again? But no, the border was a stream, and Flowerkit knew he hadn't been here yet. He tried sniffing at the air. The scents were confusing. The Shadowclan smell seemed to be both fresh and old, and it smelled... permanent, as if it had been there so long it had been infused into the ground. Flowerkit looked down.

The ground beneath him was somewhat clear of needles and flattened. Flowerkit saw the imprint of many pawprints, fossilized there from the countless cats that walked on this ground all the time. Just like the ground in the Thunderclan camp. Flowerkit's eyes widened. He'd found the camp!

He wasn't *in* the camp, of course. As he looked around, he noticed that what little undergrowth available was threaded inconspicuously into a sort of barrier around a large but shallow dip in the ground. There was a gap right in front of him. Flowerkit crouched down. He was right in front of the entrance!

Surprisingly, there was no guard posted here. Flowerkit slowly straightened up. Maybe Shadowclan didn't fear invasion. There were no cats in sight. The way was clear. He could get the prey.

Flowerkit slunk towards the gap in the barrier, making himself as small as possible while he moved. He slowly crept into the camp.

It didn't look all that different from the ThunderClan camp, except that there were no high stone walls. Dens were built around the edges of the camp. A large deciduous tree grew on one side of the clearing, and on the other - the prey heap. Flowerkit stalked towards it, keeping low and moving quietly. His heart thudded painfully against his chest. He was so close.

As he approached, Flowerkit couldn't stop a grin from spreading across his face. There was a small mouse on top of the pile, perfect

for him to take. Flowerkit leaned forward to grab it, then froze.

"And just what do you think you're doing?" a voice growled from behind him.

# Chapter Three - Heart of the Enemy

[image]

**Chapter Three**
**Heart of the Enemy**

Flowerkit turned.

A huge russet t looming over him, lip curled in a threatening snarl. The tom had a white tipped tail and distinct white markings around his eyes and muzzle. The warrior's muscles were tensed and his claws were extended. Another cat was slinking towards them, a dark gray tabby with hostile green eyes. Flowerkit quivered.

"What are you doing here, ThunderClan?" the russet tom repeated with a snarl. "You're a little far from home." He growled threateningly.

Flowerkit crouched down and flattened his ears under the ShadowClan warrior's fury. He didn't dare reply - and he didn't think he could speak even if he wanted to.

"Come to steal prey, it looks like," the tabby she-cat growled. Her malignant green gaze was locked on Flowerkit, who was reminded strongly of Mosskit. Except that this cat could actually hurt him.

"We don't take kindly to prey-stealers here, ThunderClan," the tom spat. "Even kit ones."

By this time other ShadowClan cats were stirring. Some had emerged from their dens to watch the commotion with glittering eyes. Most of the cats looked angry. Flowerkit shrank back.

"What's wrong, kitten? Cat got your tongue?" the tabby jeered.

"Oh, lay off!" an unknown voice spat. "Can't you see that he's scared

out of his wits?" Flowerkit didn't dare take his eyes off the two cats facing him to see who had spoken.

"So he should be!" the gray tabby snarled back, looking at whoever had spoken. She returned her glare to Flowerkit. "You thought you could just stroll into our camp and take our prey, did you?" She laughed, but there was no humour in her voice. "I always knew ThunderClan cats were frog-brained, but I didn't think they were *this* stupid."

"I am not stupid!" Flowerkit hissed back before he could stop himself. The familiar feeling of anger had returned. "I found my way here, didn't I?"

"That just proves my point," the ShadowClan warrior growled. "What in the name of StarClan possessed you to come here in the dead of night?"

Flowerkit lowered his head and scuffed his paw against the ground. "I did it on a dare."

"A *dare?*" The tabby she-cat wasn't the only one to speak this time. Multiple voices echoed the words from around the camp. The gray tabby's eyes flashed with outrage. "You came to raid our camp in the dead of night on a *dare?*"

"Be at ease, Willowfang. I will deal with this," a new voice spoke from behind him.

Flowerkit whirled to see who the new rumbling voice belonged to. He found himself staring into narrowed amber eyes.

"Of course, Thicketstar," the tabby, Willowfang, replied in a suddenly subdued voice. Flowerkit bristled. Thicket*star*? The cat in front of him was ShadowClan's leader?

The tom was white, with pale brown markings that gave his fur a dirty appearance. His amber eyes were dark and brooding, and his voice was low as he spoke. "Foxmask. Take a patrol to survey the area. Make sure this isn't a trap."

"Yes, Thicketstar," the russet tom who had first confronted

Flowerkit responded. He turned away, calling out a few names. "Rosefur, Sparrowcry, Thornscar! Let's go."

The ShadowClan leader returned his glare to Flowerkit. "You made a grave mistake in coming here, kit," he rumbled. "Your quest was hopeless. Tell me, what brought this on?"

Flowerkit met Thicketstar's gaze evenly. He forced his fur to lay flat, willing it not to show his fear. "I thought if I could steal some of your prey, the other kits would respect me," he mewed loudly. "And I almost did it, too!"

Thicketstar chuckled darkly. "My warriors were following you since you crossed the border, foolish kit. You had no chance of success."

Flowerkit's eyes widened. He'd been followed? The ShadowClan cats had watched him wander the forest in circles all night? Embarrassment heated his pelt. He shuffled his paws. "What do I do now, then? Are you going to send me back?" Sharp, painful anger pricked him as he thought of returning to the ThunderClan camp in shame.

"Back?" Thicketstar echoed with a tone of mild surprise. "Not a chance, kitten. You aren't going anywhere."

The kit froze. "What do you mean?"

"Willowfang, take our prisoner to the hole and find someone to guard him," Thicketstar instructed, turning away from Flowerkit. "If all is clear when Foxmask's patrol comes back, I'm going to return to my nest."

Something grabbed Flowerkit by the scruff and lifted him. Flowerkit squirmed. "Let me go!" he hissed, but the cat held him easily and began carrying him towards a broken tree stump at one side of the camp. He was dropped in front of it.

"Get in the hole," Willowfang commanded when Flowerkit turned to face her. She fixed him with a glare that made him swallow his protests. Flowerkit turned again and saw what he hadn't before: a tunnel that led under the tree stump, framed by its sturdy roots.

Willowfang nudged him roughly from behind and sent him sprawling into the tunnel.

It was small; but Flowerkit had gone no more than four pawsteps before it opened up into a larger space. Flowerkit couldn't see just how large, however, because Willowfang was blocking the only source of light.

"You'll stay in here until Thicketstar decides what to do with you," the tabby growled from outside. Flowerkit could just barely see the glint of her green eyes as she stared down at him. "And don't even think about trying to escape. This is the only exit. If you try digging your way out, the earth will probably cave in on you, and we won't bother getting you out."

A little moonlight reached Flowerkit's eyes, and he could see Willowfang as she stood from her crouch. But then she turned and lay down, her body blocking the entrance, and the kit was plunged into darkness once more.

When Flowerkit's panic finally subdued minutes later, the wave of exhaustion that hit him nearly knocked him off his paws. The tom slipped to the ground, and he was asleep before his eyes were fully closed.

He woke to the sound of loud voices. Flowerkit blinked open his eyes, and for a heartbeat didn't know where he was. Why wasn't Ashenbird beside him? And why wasn't he in a nest?

Suddenly he remembered. *I'm in ShadowClan!* Flowerkit looked around. He was in the hole underneath the tree stump. Sunlight came in from the tunnel entrance, which was no longer blocked. He heard voices coming from outside the hole, but he couldn't see anyone. Cautiously, he made his way out into the clearing.

An unfamiliar black marbled tabby had her back to Flowerkit. She was arguing with another ShadowClan she-cat, a calico with pale orange eyes. The calico spotted him immediately.

"So you're the little trespasser that woke us all up so rudely last night?" The calico said with a glare. When Flowerkit didn't reply,

she snorted and swished her tail. "I lost a good chunk of sleep because of you. Don't you think you should repay me somehow?"

"Oh, lay off, Gingerclaw," the black tabby meowed. She had turned around, but was still looking at the calico she-cat. "You know how kits are, you have your own!"

"Perhaps, but my kits know better," Gingerclaw said with a haughty sniff. Flowerkit immediately took an intense disliking for the queen. She fixed him with a beady stare. "A dare, honestly! A newborn would have more sense than that."

Flowerkit bristled at her tone. He hated cats who talked about him like he wasn't there. Especially Mosskit. But this she-cat was really getting under his nerves. Unfortunately, just as he opened his mouth to say something in his own defense the calico queen turned and ambled off, with a last scowl over her shoulder. Flowerkit fumed silently.

"Don't mind her, dear," the other she-cat, evidently his new guard, mewed gently. "She means well."

"Sure," Flowerkit scoffed. He said nothing more, and instead glared at his paws, seething. The black tabby sat beside him.

"Where's Willowfang? I thought she was my guard," Flowerkit said eventually, after sitting in silence for a while.

The marbled tabby's whiskers twitched. "She was, but she's in her nest now. I'm sure it was a long night for her."

"Oh." Flowerkit looked up. The sun was already fairly high in the sky. He'd slept a long time. He wondered if ThunderClan had even noticed his absence. The kit's shoulders slumped as he considered it. But no, of course Mosskit and the other kits would have noticed. He scowled to himself. They were probably laughing, glad they had gotten rid of him!

"Will Thicketstar let me go?" Flowerkit questioned the warrior. It was a few moments before she replied.

"It's hard to say." The tabby's tail swished. "He might decide to hold

you as hostage for a price, and make ThunderClan give up part of their territory to get you back." Shock filled Flowerkit, but then she continued, "Or he may just send you off with a warning. He has to keep the code in mind, too."

"I didn't think I could hurt ThunderClan like that," Flowerkit whispered. "Would they really give up their territory to get me back?" He would have to find a way to escape before that happened.

"What do you think?" she countered.

Flowerkit sighed. "I doubt it. They don't even like me."

"Why not?" the warrior asked. "I thought everyone liked kits." Amusement lightened her mew.

"No way. I bet they're all glad to be rid of me. They probably won't even bother to look for me."

"I'm sure that's not true," the ShadowClan cat purred. "Your clan will be in a panic right now, trust me. But for now, that's not our worry. I'm sure you're hungry, aren't you?"

Her words immediately made Flowerkit conscious of the clawing hunger in his stomach. He'd been trying to ignore it up to now. The tabby caught his expression and laughed gently. "I'll get you something to eat, then we can talk more."

Flowerkit bit back a sharp reply - *What if I don't want to talk more?* - but the prospect of food was making his belly ache even more. He hadn't eaten since the thrush the day before. "Thanks," he murmured.

"Of course. Follow me," the warrior said and she stood, beckoning to Flowerkit with her tail. Flowerkit followed eagerly. She led him over to the fresh-kill pile, and picked out something small from it. She dropped it at his paws, but when Flowerkit saw what it was, he recoiled in disgust.

"A frog? You eat frogs?" he hissed, staring at the small creature, its legs splayed awkwardly against the ground. He curled his lip.

"That's gross."

"We eat what we can," the tabby meowed with a sigh. "Go on. You should be grateful we're feeding you at all."

Flowerkit hedged. The frog did NOT look appetizing in the slightest. But his hunger was adamant, and what the ShadowClan cat was true... He touched it with a claw. One of its limbs flopped over, and he jumped back, fur bristling. "I'm not eating that!" he hissed.

"Fine, fine." His guard set it back onto the pile, exchanging it for a small mouse. Flowerkit accepted it gratefully.

"What are you doing, giving the trespasser a tour?" a voice called out. The marbled she-cat waved her tail dismissively. Flowerkit didn't know who had called out.

As he munched on the mouse, he noticed two pairs of eyes watching him from the shadows at the edge of camp. He stared back, and the eyes disappeared. Flowerkit returned to his meal.

A moment later two kits came scampering out towards him. They were the eyes he'd seen. These kits were actually smaller than him. One was a tiny, solid gray fluffy she-cat and the other was a mottled ginger tom. Flowerkit glared at them, muscles tensed.

"Are you really from ThunderClan?" the gray kitten asked in a squeaky voice. Her eyes widened at Flowerkit's nod. "Wow! Is it true, then, that you live in the trees like squirrels?"

Flowerkit snorted. "Of course not. Our camp is in a hollow, not a tree."

"How old are you?" the she-kit mewed, barely even acknowledging his previous answer.

"Three moons."

"Really? I'm almost two," she replied proudly, puffing out her chest. "We both are. This is my brother, Duskkit," she said, flicking her tail at the tomkit beside her. "And I'm Graykit. Who are you?"

Flowerkit hesitated before responding. "My name's Flowerkit," he finally meowed grudgingly.

The younger tom, Duskkit, looked surprised. "But that's a she-cat's name," he said. "Are you a she-cat?"

"No!" Flowerkit spat. "I'm a tom. It's not my fault I have a stupid name."

"I like it," Graykit declared. "Flowerkit is a good name. I like flowers."

"Yeah, because you're a she-kit," Flowerkit hissed. "I'm not!"

Duskkit scowled. "You don't have to get mad at us about it," he muttered.

"Graykit! Duskkit! I thought I told you to stay away from him!" Gingerclaw was stalking towards them, her expression furious. She swept the two young cats away from Flowerkit. "Don't disobey me! Go back to the nursery!"

"Aww!" Duskkit complained, but they both obeyed the fuming mother. Graykit glanced back over her shoulder. "Bye, Flowerkit!" she cried before scampering after her brother.

Gingerclaw now loomed over him. "Stay away from my kits," she hissed, before turning and padding away after them.

Flowerkit flattened his ears and hissed at the queen's retreating figure. Stupid ShadowClan queen! He hadn't asked them to come over! He started when a light pressure touched his shoulder. The tom turned his head to see the black tabby standing beside him, resting her tail on his shoulder and smiling down at him.

"If you're done your mouse, let's go. We should probably return to the prisoner's den," she meowed.

"Fine," Flowerkit grumbled. He ducked away from her touch and fell into step behind her.

They had almost reached the hole when a raised alarm yowl

sounded. "Tresspassers!" It became a chant, spreading through the camp like wildfire as cats turned towards the entrance, fur bristling, claws already out. "Tresspassers, tresspassers!"

Flowerkit looked around in confusion. ShadowClan already knew he was here! What was going on? But then he spied a familiar gray pelt, flanked by two larger ShadowClan cats. His heart thudded.

"Why are you here? State your business before you get shredded!" Thicketstar snarled. The ShadowClan leader's voice was easily heard over the hisses of his clanmates.

"I have come for my kit," Ashenbird declared.

# Chapter 3.5 - Heart of the Enemy

[image]

**Chapter 3.5**
**Heart of the Enemy (part 2)**

**[A/N: I started writing this part after I published the previous pages, only to realize that this really belonged in the last chapter. So it's "Chapter 3.5"]**

"Ashenbird!" Flowerkit gasped.

The queen's eyes met his from across the clearing, and a second later Ashenbird was bounding towards him, ignoring the furious snarls of the ShadowClan cats. She touched Flowerkit's head, nuzzling his fur, and then started licking him frantically, as if by making him clean, she could keep him safe.

Heat sprang up behind Flowerkit's eyes. "I didn't think you would come for me," he told his mother, his voice thick. Ashenbird let out a growl.

"Why wouldn't I come for you? Oh, Flowerkit!" she meowed angrily, but she continued to lick his head lovingly. Then she broke away. "How could you? The whole clan has been searching for you. What on earth possessed you, Flowerkit?"

"It was Mosskit's fault," Flowerkit protested, but they were interrupted by a growling voice.

"As touching as this reunion is," Thicketstar snarled, "I must remind you that you're trespassing in our camp."

Ashenbird drew up her head. "Of course, Thicketstar. My apologies. I will take my kit back to ThunderClan, if you would let me, and then hopefully we can put this whole matter behind us."

"Hardly." Thicketstar's amber eyes were cold. "This kit has violated the warrior code by coming uninvited into our camp."

"And you may rest assured he shall be punished accordingly," Ashenbird agreed. Her fluffy tail curled protectively around Flowerkit, who was watching with wide eyes.

Thicketstar's forehead furrowed as he regarded the queen and her kit with a suspicious gaze. Then he nodded. "Very well. I will be waiting for the proof of your words, Ashenbird. You may return to your camp - with a ShadowClan escort."

"We don't need a-" Flowerkit began, fluffing out his black coat defensively, but suddenly Ashenbird's tail was over his mouth and he barely kept himself from choking on fur.

"Thank you, Thicketstar." Ashenbird ducked her head. Then, to Flowerkit, "Let's go."

The gray furred queen led her black kit out of ShadowClan's camp, followed closely by two of their warriors as the sun began to descend in the sky.

# Chapter Four - Sprouts of Anger

[image]

**Chapter Four**
**Sprouts of Anger**

Pebbles rolled and skidded under Flowerkit's paws as he clambered down the steep path that led down into ThunderClan's camp. Ashenbird, walking beside him, steadied him occasionally, but Flowerkit's paws were heavy and his limbs ached with weariness. He kept glancing back at the two ShadowClan warriors, who were following silently.

Finally they made it the the bottom of the hollow. Their arrival was greeted by an eerie silence. Flowerkit looked around, and saw that almost all the warriors were staring at him, all conversations halted. No, not just him, he reflected. The ShadowClan warriors too. But the strange quiet of the camp unnerved him.

Sprucestar emerged from the crowd, and a few cats let out hushed growls or angry murmurs. But the ThunderClan leader was completely composed as she approached.

"Ashenbird, you have returned," Sprucestar said approvingly. "And you've found Flowerkit. I'm glad." Her pale blueish-green eyes narrowed as she regarded the ShadowClan warriors evenly. "Thank you for your services, but they are no longer needed. You may return to your own territory."

"We have orders not to leave until the kit's punishment is confirmed," one of the warriors replied coldly.

Sprucestar's eyes flashed. "You have my word. You can leave now."

The two ShadowClan warriors exchanged glances, then the one who had spoken dipped his head to Sprucestar. They both turned and climbed up the stony path, and Flowerkit's gaze followed them until they were well out of sight in the forest above.

There was a sudden release of the strained air in the camp, as if the clan let out a collective breath it had been holding. A lot of cats relaxed out of tense poses and some sheathed their claws. Quiet conversations broke out once again.

"Flowerkit!" one voice called out. Flowerkit looked over to see Sagepaw bounding towards him. "I'm so happy you're safe!"

Flowerkit lowered his head. "I was worried no one would," he admitted.

Sprucestar cleared her throat, gently interrupting. "Flowerkit. I realize you must be tired, but the matter must be discussed."

Flowerkit's ears pricked forward. "It wasn't my fault! Mosskit dared me to do it. They all did. The other kits hate me!"

Sprucestar twitched her whiskers. "As I said, the matter must be discussed. Ashenbird, would you come with me? Flowerkit too." Without waiting for a reply the leader turned and walked off, but glanced over her shoulder to make sure they were following.

Ashenbird nudged Flowerkit forward. "Come," she mewed gently.

"See you later, Flowerkit," Sagepaw murmured quietly as they padded away. Flowerkit had a sudden, strange feeling that after this nothing would be the same.

Surprisingly, Sprucestar was leading them towards the nursery. Flowerkit was about to ask why, but at that moment Spikekit tumbled out the entrance, followed closely by Rainkit, Acornkit, and finally Mosskit. The she-kit's green eyes locked balefully with Flowerkit's, but none of them spoke. Then Aspenfall and Rabbitfur, Acornkit and Mosskit's mother, came out after them.

Sprucestar nodded to queens. "Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. If you'd please, follow me to my den." Flowerkit flicked his tail in annoyance. Sprucestar had already talked to them? How much was he being left out of? He couldn't puzzle over his thoughts because Ashenbird was nudging him forward again, so he followed after the others.

The path that went to the leader's den was even more unstable than the hollow entrance. Ashenbird had to help him over the rocks, although Flowerkit was satisfied to see that Aspenfall had to aid Spikekit and Rainkit too. Mosskit and Acornkit, however, had no trouble, being of almost apprentice age. The leader's den was a cleft in the hollow wall that led out onto the HighLedge. Flowerkit couldn't help pausing to look down at the camp from this high perch. He felt a thrill, seeing the cats below, and wondered if this was what it would be to be leader, looking down at the Clan from a position of power. All too quickly Ashenbird pulled him away from the ledge and urged him to head into the den.

Inside the rock cleft that served as Sprucestar's den, the group of nine sat down in a rough circle. Sprucestar cleared her throat.

"We're just waiting for Raggedstep, now," the leader explained.

A few minutes later the ThunderClan deputy came bounding in. "Sorry, Sprucestar," he huffed. "I got held up by Sunheart. He asked me to tell you be careful. Demanded it, really."

"Thank you, Raggedstep," Sprucestar replied, nodding to her deputy. "Although Sunheart needn't worry. StarClan cannot tell me how to run my clan." She shifted her paws and straightened her shoulders. "Now we can begin."

She turned her gaze to Flowerkit. "Flowerkit, you broke the warrior code by trespassing on ShadowClan's territory, endangering both the peace between our clans and your own life. What is your reasoning behind this?"

Flowerkit shuffled his paws. If he blamed the other kits now, in front of everyone, he would sound like he was being a tattle-tale. So instead he replied truthfully, "I wanted to prove myself."

"To who?" Sprucestar pressed.

"Everyone!" Flowerkit snapped. His discomfort at being questioned came out as anger in his voice. "I'm tired of being teased! Mosskit dared me to do it! I had to go, otherwise I'm a coward!"

He heard a quiet snorting sound, probably from Mosskit. He glared in her direction, but his vision was going a little blurry... He shook his head.

"I see. Mosskit?"

"Heh?" Mosskit stammered. "N-no, what?"

"Did you indeed 'dare' Flowerkit?" Sprucestar's voice was stern.

"No!" Mosskit huffed. "He stupidly went off on his own. It wasn't us."

"Us?" Sprucestar met the eyes of each kit. "So you were all in on this?"

"No," protested Spikekit, at the same time Acornkit admitted, "Yes..."

Rainkit, as usual, was silent.

Sprucestar shook her head slowly. "I see. Kits, could you step outside a moment? I need to speak with your mothers."

"What? I want to hear!" Flowerkit complained.

"I'm not leaving," Spikekit agreed. But a heated glare from Aspenfall sent him fleeing from the den. The others followed with heavy sighs. Except Flowerkit.

"I want to hear," he repeated stubbornly.

"Flowerkit, please," Ashenbird murmured softly. "Go."

He met his mother's pleading eyes, and with a sigh of his own, turned and walked out of the den.

Mosskit, Acornkit, Spikekit and Rainkit were huddled beside the rock wall, their ears pricked and eyes glued to the entrance. Before Flowerkit could even say anything Mosskit hushed him sharply. Irritation surged through Flowerkit. Did they really think they could hear anything said? He sat a little ways away, with his back to

them, and stewed over the injustices of his life.

It seemed to take a long time. Eventually, though, Rabbitfur came out and gestured brusquely for her kits to follow her. They did, and the queen led them down the slope to the ground below. Flowerkit watched as Goldenpelt, Rabbitfur's mate and Mosskit and Acornkit's father, ran over to meet them. Rabbitfur whispered something into his ear, and the golden tom seemed stunned.

Next Aspenfall emerged, visibly fuming. She said nothing but swept past and started immediately down into camp. Spikekit and Acornkit went after her meekly.

Ashenbird came out then, followed by Raggedstep and Sprucestar. Ashenbird's eyes were sad. It hurt Flowerkit to see it, more so than Aspenfall's anger or Rabbitfur's silent condemnation would. He fell into step behind the gray-furred she-cat, just like the other kits had, and was just as quiet.

Raggedstep climbed down too, but Sprucestar remained on the Highledge. Her strong voice echoed strongly through the camp: "Let all those old enough to catch their own prey, gather here for a Clan meeting!"

Most of the cats were already in the clearing, so it took very little time until everyone was seated facing the leader. Flowerkit felt weak with anxious anticipation.

"Cats of ThunderClan. As you all know, one of our kits disappeared last night. Flowerkit was found in ShadowClan's camp, and was returned safely by Ashenbird. This kit has put our clan in danger for selfish reasons, although it wasn't altogether his fault." Sprucestar's gaze swept the clearing. "Some, if not all, of the other kits had a part in it too. Since we are unable to distinguish exactly who was involved, all five kits shall be punished."

Flowerkit flattened his ears. That didn't bode well, although at least the punishment wasn't his alone. He let himself shoot a triumphant glare Mosskit's way before Sprucestar continued.

"The punishment will be that each kit must wait one extra moon

after their apprentice age before becoming apprentices."

It took a moment for the words to sink in. When they did, mutters broke out amongst the Clan. Flowerkit stared up at Sprucestar with disbelieving eyes.

"But that's not *fair!*" Mosskit yelled out. "I'm five moons already! You mean I have to wait another *two* before I can get my apprentice name?"

"Yeah!" Acornkit chimed in. "Flowerkit's the one who wandered off. Why should we be punished?"

"Quiet," Sprucestar demanded. "The punishment is just. It is so that you will all have plenty of time to reflect on your behaviour, and hopefully discourage anything like this from happening in the future."

"Not fair!" Spikekit wailed.

The shock was wearing off, and anger churned in Flowerkit's stomach instead. His sight was going blurry again. He felt his fur lift along his spine and his claws scratched the ground. Sprucestar thought she was being *fair?* She was keeping him stuck in the nursery, with the cats who made his life miserable, for an extra moon than was necessary! He would *die!*

He looked around with slitted eyes, until something caught his distorted gaze - yellow eyes wide with fear. He had to wait for his vision to clear until he could see who it was: Sunheart, ThunderClan's medicine cat. The golden tom was staring straight at Flowerkit, obvious worry in his expression. What was he afraid for?

Flowerkit looked away first. While the others were still muttering about Sprucestar's announcement, or in Spikekit's case, moaning about things being *unfair,* he turned and walked away, towards the nursery, and didn't look back until he was safely inside the den walls.

It wasn't long before Ashenbird came in after him. She said nothing, just stood there behind Flowerkit as he faced the wall. Soon he

couldn't take it anymore.

"It's all your fault!" Flowerkit spat, turning on the older she-cat. "You're the one who gave me the wrong name. You're the reason my life sucks!" He nearly screamed the words.

Ashenbird just sighed, her head bowed slightly as if she was accepting the weight of Flowerkit's claims. She moved forward and sat beside him, her tail wrapped around his little frame. When she started to speak, her voice was slow and edged with sadness.

"I never did tell you why I named you Flowerkit, did I?" Ashenbird's eyes were unfocused, as if she was seeing something far away, and not the bramble walls of the nursery. "There was a lot I never told you. I suppose it's about time I did."

Flowerkit was stunned. "What do you mean? What all haven't you told me?"

Ashenbird smiled at him. "I was never supposed to have you," she said quietly. "I already thought I had had my last litter moons ago. After all, I am getting on in my seasons."

Flowerkit was confused. He knew Ashenbird wasn't the youngest queen in the nursery, but what did that have to do with anything?

Ashenbird must have seen the question in his eyes, because she continued, "I had been planning on moving to the elder's den after you were apprenticed."

"Elder's den?" Flowerkit echoed, shocked. Ashenbird the elder? That wasn't possible. But his mother didn't give him a chance to object.

"I was lucky to have you - and even luckier that you survived. You..." Ashenbird seemed to struggle to find words. "You weren't alone. You had a brother, but he... He died only a moment after he was born." Her words, full of grief, stunned Flowerkit into silence. Ashenbird took a moment before continuing. "At first we all thought you would die, too, and it was a miracle when you didn't. You stubbornly hung on to life, like the plants that cling to the stone of the hollow where everything was killed long ago. So fragile, yet so

strong." She smiled. "And I had always wanted a Flowerkit."

The two stayed silent for a while after that, Ashenbird reminiscing, and Flowerkit just trying to take everything in.

"Why didn't you ever tell me I had a littermate?" he finally blurted out.

"Because you didn't need to know. He's not here now, so what's the use?"

"What about my father? You told me he was dead!"

"Your father is dead, Flowerkit," Ashenbird sighed. "I didn't lie to you."

"Oh." Flowerkit looked at his paws. "What happened to him?"

"Sunheart said he was sick on the inside - it wasn't greencough, but something that affected only him. No one knew he was sick until one day he just didn't wake up."

"Do you miss him?"

"Very much so."

"Would you rather have him back than me?" Flowerkit wanted to know.

"Flowerkit, no!" Ashenbird cried, suddenly furious. "I would never trade you for anything, or anyone."

Flowerkit flattened his ears. "Not even my father?"

"Not even him," Ashenbird confirmed.

Flowerkit sighed and curled up against his mother. Ashenbird's pelt was soft and her body was warm. He felt safe beside her. There was no way she could ever be an elder... Ashenbird murmured something to him, but Flowerkit was too far gone already to hear her words. His lids slipped low over his eyes, and in the next moment he was fast asleep.

# Chapter Five - Pain of Betrayal

[image]

**Chapter Five**
**Pain of Betrayal**

The next morning dawned cold and gray. Flowerkit's moss was damp as he stirred from his nest. Ashenbird was laying beside him, with her head on her paws but her eyes open. She smiled when she saw Flowerkit was awake.

The young tom bared his teeth in a yawn. "Where's the sun?" he mumbled sleepily.

"It's hiding today," Ashenbird replied quietly. "You can stay in your nest if you want."

Flowerkit mulled it over, having not quite reached full awareness. He yawned again. "No, I'm hungry," he mewed finally, standing up and stretching out his legs. The air was cold, and he fluffed out his fur against the chill.

When he emerged from the nursery, he was greeted by a spattering of drops on his head from the brambles. The tom flicked his ears crossly. There was a fine mist in the air, not quite rain, but enough to make everything wet. A few cats moved lazily around camp, but activity was muted.

Flowerkit picked his way slowly across the damp grass towards the prey pile. He was disappointed to see only a couple soaked mice laying there. He didn't want soggy fresh-kill!

"The hunting patrol should be back soon," a voice said from behind Flowerkit.

He turned to see that a broad-shouldered, mostly black tortoiseshell tom had come up behind him. The warrior sat and ran a paw along his whiskers. "At least, I hope so. I'm so hungry I could eat a

badger!"

A lean black tom with fur like Flowerkit's came up beside him. "There's still two mice there, Crowstorm," he meowed with a roll of his eyes.

"But they're wet! That's gross! Right, Flowerkit?" The larger tom, Crowstorm, turned to the kit with an expectant look in his bright amber eyes.

"Er... Yeah." Flowerkit nodded. "Who wants wet prey?"

"Exactly!" Crowstorm said triumphantly.

"I don't see how that's any worse than a badger," the solid black warrior replied, wrinkling his nose.

"It's called a figure of speech, mouse-brain," Crowstorm snorted.

Ashenbird came padding up to them. "Beetlepelt, Crowstorm, my sons, how are you?"

Crowstorm leaned over and licked the queen's ear. "We're well, Ashenbird. And you?"

Flowerkit glared. "Sons? But you're *my* mother!" he protested to Ashenbird before she could reply.

"She's our mother too, kitten," Beetlepelt said with a sneer.

Flowerkit blinked. He knew Ashenbird had other litters, but he hadn't ever really realized that meant he had other kin. "So you're my brothers?" he mewed hesitantly.

"Guess so, brother," Crowstorm said cheerfully. He flicked his tail over Flowerkit's ears, making him flinch. "We're all kin here."

Flowerkit regarded the two warriors dubiously. Beetlepelt's fur was the same color as his, and Crowstorm had the same orange eyes... But Flowerkit didn't know if he wanted these two furballs to be his brothers. He wanted *his* brother, the one whose name Ashenbird hadn't said.

Flowerkit turned his back on his supposed kin and with slow pawsteps made his way back to the nursery. If there was no prey to be found and nothing to do in this chill he wanted to be back in his nest.

Unfortunately, his wishes weren't often granted.

Just as Flowerkit reached the gap in the bramble walls a sudden weight hit him from out of nowhere. He was sent sprawling, the breath knocked out of him. And then he couldn't breathe with a paw pressing down on his chest.

"Look here, it's the little troublemaker," growled a familiar voice.

"Mosskit!" Flowerkit spat. He glared up into her deep green eyes, narrowed in anger. The she-kit just huffed.

"It's your fault *we* have to wait an extra moon for our apprentice ceremony," she hissed, for now Acornkit had come up beside them. "You didn't really think you would get away with that, did you?"

Flowerkit hissed and lashed out at her with his paws, but she just put more pressure on his chest. "I'm going to make you pay!" Mosskit growled.

Claws dug into his shoulder, but when Flowerkit cried out in pain he was muffled by thick fur pressed against his muzzle. Acornkit's tail. It was suffocating him. Flowerkit thrashed under Mosskit's weight as pain blossomed from his shoulder and spiked from other various places. He couldn't breathe. Dark spots danced in his vision and his chest screamed for air, and all Flowerkit could feel was pain, pain, pain before he blacked out completely.

# Chapter Six - The Coward's Way Out

[image]

**Chapter Six**
**The Coward's Way Out**

When Flowerkit woke, he had been shoved underneath brambles, tucked away behind the nursery where no one could see him. Stifling a groan of pain, he wriggled his way out.

The sky was still a miserable gray, so Flowerkit had no idea how much time had passed while he was unconscious, but it didn't feel like long. Everything ached. His injured shoulder hurt like thorns in his skin, and various scratches on his body inflicted by either Mosskit's claws or the brambles stung fiercely. The small kit was nearly swaying on his paws in exhaustion.

He had to leave. Looking back on the attack, Flowerkit had thought that Mosskit and Acornkit would actually kill him. They hadn't this time, but if Ashenbird or Sprucestar found out what they had done to him and they were punished further, well... Flowerkit feared for his life.

Glancing around, Flowerkit could hear voices, but from where he stood there were no other cats in sight. Good. No one could see him like this. He dropped into a crouch, wincing as his wounded shoulder protested, and crept forward, out from the shadow of the nursery.

Only a few cats were milling about the camp, and there was no sign of Ashenbird or his other supposed kin. Flowerkit hesitated. If we was going, now would be the best time to leave. No point in waiting until nightfall - the longer he stayed here the greater his chances of being found. Shock struck Flowerkit as he realized that his own home had now become just as dangerous as the ShadowClan camp.

The sooner he left the better.

Flowerkit's gaze raked the stone walls of the hollow. No escape there. There was no way he would be able to scale those, not as a kit, and definitely not injured. The only conceivable way out was the main path.

Checking once more that no one was watching him, especially his mother or any of the other kits, Flowerkit hurried forward, keeping close to the sides of the camp. He had just reached the way up and placed one hesitant paw on the path when voices sounded from above. The kit started and quickly ducked back into the shadows.

Four warriors scampered past him, each one carrying prey. The hunting patrol. It seemed like they'd done well, despite the weather. And that the prey in their jaws prevented them from scenting the tiny black kit pressed up against the stone.

Flowerkit watched as the cats out in camp turned with excited cries to the returned patrol. Everyone's attention was on them. Seizing the opportunity, Flowerkit scrambled up the path without looking back.

At the top, Flowerkit ducked under a thicket, his heart racing and his scratches screaming in pain. His heartbeat thudded in his chest, and he waited ten counts before slowly craning forward to look down at the camp.

No one had noticed him.

Flowerkit let out his breath in a whoosh of air. Escape was possible. He could finally get away from the bullies that threatened his life.

Even now, he could hear Mosskit's voice in his head, mocking him, branding him a coward for running away.

He wasn't running away. He was just... Taking measures to preserve his life. Yeah.

Finally when the beat in his ears calmed and his limbs stored shaking, Flowerkit dared to climb out from under the thicket. After quickly checking to make sure the coast was clear, he set off in the

opposite direction than the way he had taken... Was it only two days ago? Heading away from the lake. Away from clan territory.

Flowerkit didn't really know where he was going, or how we would survive out on his own, but he knew he had to get away from the clans, away from the other kits, away from everything he had ever known.

He had only taken a few pawsteps when a voice spoke up from behind him, saying simply his name.

"Flowerkit."

Flowerkit whirled. There, with one paw hovering above the ground and that same fearful look in his eyes, was Sunheart. The medicine cat slowly put his paw down, taking a single step towards him. "You can't leave."

Flowerkit bared his tiny fangs in a hiss. "You can't stop me!"

"Flowerkit, you have a destiny written out for you - you can't run away. *Please,* stay with the clan." Sunheart's voice was pleading. Flowerkit wondered what it was that made the tom so desperately afraid - the destiny he'd mentioned? What did that mean? Something StarClan had decreed? For just a second, Flowerkit considered asking - but no. He wasn't interested. What had StarClan done for him lately, anyway? If he was truly important, they wouldn't let him get pushed around and bullied by the other kits like he was a mouse trapped by the cat's claws. The anger that burned in his belly now had another cause: not just Mosskit and the others, but those stupid dead cats who supposedly had so much power. He wouldn't let them stop him, or the golden tom who faced him now.

"You're wrong. I have no reason to stay. Watch me go!" Flowerkit snarled. He turned tail and ran, ignoring the cries of Sunheart calling his name. He thought maybe he heard pawsteps drumming behind him, giving chase, but when he risked a glance back there was nothing there. Just his own paws and his own ragged breaths. Suddenly he remembered the pain in his shoulder and had to shudder to a halt.

Flowerkit pricked his ears and gazed around, standing as still as he could, but he couldn't see or hear anything. No one was following him. And just when he came to the conclusion that he was safe, he realized he didn't know where he was. Which was almost scarier than the prospect of being chased. He suddenly very much wanted his mother.

But he would probably never see Ashenbird again. Flowerkit had to come to terms with that. So he lowered his head and trudged on in the same direction, heading into the unknown.

# Chapter Seven - A Place With Strangers

[image]

**Chapter Seven**
**A Place With Strangers**

Flowerkit felt like he had been walking for days when finally he couldn't detect any ThunderClan scents anymore. All along there had always been vague smells of his clanmates, scents that he couldn't recognize or follow with his young nose, but now all those smells of home were gone. He was truly in unfamiliar territory, and ThunderClan was far behind him.

The tiny tomkit was distracted by a painful gurgle from his stomach. He hadn't eaten since. . . When was it that he had last eaten? He couldn't remember. His tummy hurt, his shoulder hurt, all his muscles ached, and he just wanted to fall over right now and sleep. Which, ultimately, was what he did. All his pain came over him in a rush. Flowerkit's legs gave out from under him and he collapsed onto his side, slipping into an uneasy state of unconsciousness.

He drifted through a jumble of fevered dreams. His exhausted mind flipped through all he recent events Flowerkit had gone through, warping them and offering them again to Flowerkit in deranged states. First he was with his mother, and Ashenbird smiled kindly down at him while saying, "these are your brothers, Flowerkit." Flowerkit turned to see Spikekit and Acornkit sprawled out on the ground in front of him, their blank faces to the sky, with horrible bleeding gashes in their shoulders and bellies. Flowerkit stumbled backward, right into Mosskit, who hissed into his ear, "You will pay for this," before shoving Flowerkit to the ground, her claws digging into his shoulder. Flowerkit peered up to see Ashenbird walking away from him. He opened his mouth to choke out her name, to beg her to stay and help him, but he made no sound, and the gray

queen just kept walking until Flowerkit couldn't see her anymore. Then he was staring into Thicketstar's burning amber eyes, first from close up and then they got smaller and smaller as Flowerkit moved away, and he realized that he was falling, faster and faster, while all the cats he knew stared down at him from the top of the hollow. He landed with a thud that left him screaming in pain.

His eyes blinked open drearily, and once more he had no idea how much time had elapsed while he was asleep, but the sky was black now. Just black. The cloud cover from that morning remained, and Flowerkit couldn't see a single star.

He shifted slowly, wincing as his muscles painfully reminded him of his injuries. More insistent than that, though, were the contortions his empty stomach was doing. He needed to get food, and fast. The kit got to his feet.

"Well, well, well. Lookit who's awake."

Flowerkit jumped at the unfamiliar gruff voice and spun, his orange eyes wide as he searched for the source. A large cat dropped down in front of him from the branches above.

For a panicked moment Flowerkit thought it was Thicketstar. The large tom had a similar build, but while Thicketstar's white underfur and light brown overcoat just gave his pelt a dirty appearance, this cat's pale fur was actually covered in a layer of grime. The tom leered down at the kit, and Flowerkit recoiled when he saw that one of the strange cat's eyes was sealed shut with what looked like dried blood and some other infected gunk. The tom laughed at his expression.

"What's the matter, you never seen a cat like me?" he meowed with a weird grin. Flowerkit noticed that another scar ran down his jawline, twisting his expressions. He shivered slightly.

"Who... Who are you?" Flowerkit asked meekly.

The cat flicked his tail and blinked his one big yellow eye. "The name's Jake."

"Jake?" Flowerkit repeated, making a face. What kind of a name was that? "Are you a kittypet?"

"Kittypet!" Jake snorted in disgust. "You wouldn't catch me taking anything from Twolegs. Nah, I'm on my own."

"So you're a rogue?" Flowerkit ventured curiously. This cat certainly fit the descriptions he had heard of the lone cats who roamed across territories with no true home, fighting every other soul they met.

"If you must." Jake's tail lashed. "You don't look like one, though. And you've got Clan scent on you." He sniffed dramatically.

Flowerkit tensed up a little. "Yeah, I'm ThunderClan. Or... I was."

The strange tom fixed him with a piercing yellow gaze. "Was, huh? Well, you're still pretty close to their territory. I'd imagine they're looking for you right now, about to jump out at us any second. Especially with that trail of blood you've been leaving."

Flowerkit bristled. "No! I can't go back! Please, you've got to help me get away from here." He hated the pleading edge to his voice, and he definitely didn't trust this rogue, but he couldn't let his clanmates find him and take him back. He just *couldn't*.

Jake let out a sputtering laugh. "So you are a runaway. Not just some lost kitten, eh?" His chuckles faded. "Well, I guess you're in luck. My hospitality stretches to injured kits, but no further." He pushed something in front of Flowerkit that the young black kitten hadn't noticed earlier. His mouth started watering.

"You can have that, but after this you're on your own. I ain't no babysitter." Jake nodded to the vole.

Flowerkit didn't need to be told twice. He fell upon the prey, vaguely noticing that it was still fresh as he took huge bites.

The dirty rogue watched in silence while Flowerkit devoured the meal, his neutral expression and single eye giving away none of his thoughts. Flowerkit thought it was a little creepy how the big tom was staring at him, but he had given him food, so he couldn't be a bad cat. Finally Flowerkit finished the vole and sat up, running a

paw along his whiskers.

"Thanks," Flowerkit mewed after a few moments of silence.

Jake snorted and flicked an ear dismissively. "What's your name, shorty?"

"Flowerkit." He narrowed his eyes, waiting the rogue's reaction.

The huge cat burst out laughing, his voice echoing loudly through the trees. "Those Clan cats sure know how to pick 'em."

Flowerkit felt his dark fur bristling along his spine. "What do you know of the Clans?" he demanded.

Jake waved his tail. "I've lived near your kind long enough to know a thing or two about them." He wasn't laughing anymore. "Nearly got chased off a few times, too. You guys are way too protective of your borders."

"Borders define our Clans and they help us defend what is ours," Flowerkit snapped, repeating what he'd been told a few times by the queens in the nursery. He didn't know why he was defending the Clans to this rogue, though. After all, he wasn't really part of them anymore.

"Ease up. I'm not trying to insult your precious way of life." Jake slowly rose to his paws, giving Flowerkit a weird look. Though it was probably just his disfigured face that made it look strange. "Well, like I said, you're on your own now, kit." He turned around, starting to walk away.

"Wait," Flowerkit called in a panicky voice. "I- I- Can you help me with my wounds?"

Jake paused. "Your wounds? What do you want me to do with them?"

"Well, in the Clans, they use plants and stuff to heal injuries." Flowerkit gave his shoulder a gentle lick.

The white tom snorted. "I ain't no medic cat. I can't help you."

"At least help me find some spiderwebs, then?" Flowerkit pleaded.

"Spiders? What do you want with them?"

Flowerkit stifled a hiss. "It's not the spiders, it's their webs. They help stop bleeding."

Jake sniggered. "So not only are you a pampered little Clan kitten, you're a healer in training, too?"

"Am not!" Flowerkit snapped, his ears swiveling back in anger. He would never have given up the life of a warrior to be a medicine cat. He just knew a few things from being in Sunheart's den so much. Ashenbird would always take him to his den whenever he got the slightest cut in his pad. "Every cat knows about cobwebs," he told the rogue.

"If you say so," Jake drawled. "I suppose I could find a spiderweb or two for you. Just don't expect anything more from me." With that he padded off into the trees, quickly disappearing from sight and leaving Flowerkit alone once more.

The black kit sat down and worked on grooming his matted fur while he waited. The gross tang of dried blood filled his mouth as he rasped his tongue over his multiple scratches. Most of them were small and had stopped bleeding a while ago, so it was really only the gash in his shoulder that worried him. Pure fury coursed through him when he thought of Mosskit's claws digging into his shoulders as he choked on Acornkit's golden fur, and his claws scratched against the dirt. He believed he had made the right choice in leaving ThunderClan.

Eventually Jake came back, awkwardly carrying a few cobwebs on the back of his paw. He scowled in disgust as he offered them to Flowerkit. "I think there's still a spider of two clinging to them," he informed the kit.

Flowerkit rolled his eyes and took the webs from Jake's paw, pressing them onto his shoulder. "It doesn't matter, as long as it doesn't get infected," he muttered.

Jake nodded. "Alright, I did what you asked. Now I'm going before those Clan cats come looking for you. See you around, kit." Before Flowerkit could protest, the rogue had turned tail and disappeared again.

The lone kitten stood still for a few long heartbeats, wondering what in StarClan he would do. He had nowhere to go, no way to get food unless he could teach himself to hunt, and no Ashenbird to take care of him. Perhaps this hadn't been the best idea after all. Eventually though, Flowerkit started walking in the direction Jake had gone, thinking that even if he didn't see the rogue again he could probably still get farther away from Clan territory.

It wasn't long before Flowerkit felt a presence watching him wander, and he froze when a gruff voice sounded from behind him.

"Why're you following me?" Jake snapped.

Flowerkit spun around and blinked up at the huge tomcat, cringing when he saw the rogue's single yellow eye narrowed accusingly. He started stammering excuses, but they sounded pathetic even to his ears.

Jake just scowled and turned his back. "Quit following me."

"Wait," Flowerkit mewed, scampering up to him. "I don't have anywhere to go. Please, can I stay with you?"

"No." Jake didn't look at him.

"Please?"

Jake just growled and started walking again. Flowerkit hurried to keep pace with the adult cat, wincing when his shoulder protested. "I just want a place to stay."

"I ain't got one. If you're sticking with me, shorty, you're gonna be spending your days wandering." The dirty-furred rogue still wouldn't meet Flowerkit's gaze.

"I'm okay with that," Flowerkit interjected quickly. "I just don't want to have to go back to the Clans."

Jake said nothing, however his brisk pace slowed the tiniest bit.

Flowerkit happily took that as a yes.

# Chapter Eight - The Rogue's Apprentice

[image]

**Chapter Eight**
**The Rogue's Apprentice**

"Get your tail down!"

Flowerkit winced as his hindquarters were forcefully pushed lower to the ground by a large paw.

"Spread your feet. You think you can stalk like that? Quit twitchin' your tail, shorty. You're hopeless."

Flowerkit glared balefully up into Jake's single yellow eye. The rogue was trying to teach him a hunting crouch - and though he insisted the issues were all on Flowerkit's part, the small kitten was certain Jake was a horrible mentor.

"I'm not going to be hunting for you anymore," the dirty-furred rogue had told him earlier. "So you're gonna have to learn to catch your own food."

He awkwardly tried to follow the older tom's instructions, sliding his paws out sideways and attempting to quell the irritated movements of his tail. The position felt altogether wrong.

Jake surveyed Flowerkit's stance with a critical gaze for a long heartbeat. Then he snorted condescendingly. "You look like a squattin' duck," he told the kit, whose muscles were now starting to cramp.

Flowerkit stood and stretched out his legs. "You're teaching me wrong," he meowed accusingly.

"Am not." The words were accompanied by a harsh cuff around

Flowerkit's ears. "Now get back down and try again."

Flowerkit growled under his breath and resumed his crouch. He figured out that if he placed his paws a little closer together, he could balance easier. Then he looked up and watched as Jake ambled away. The rogue stopped a fair distance away, then pointed out a specific leaf on the ground. "Okay, shrimp, try pouncin' on this."

Flowerkit nodded and sunk a little lower into his crouch. His gaze locked on his target. His hindquarters waggled, his tail flickered, and then he pushed off his back legs and sprung as far as he could... landing awkwardly on three paws, a fox-length away from the leaf.

Jake rolled his eye. "My mind is blown by your stupidity, kit. Your brain must be the size of a worm."

Flowerkit's pitch-black fur bristled defensively and he bared his teeth. "Quit mockin' me!"

After only two days of being with Jake, Flowerkit already found himself talking like the scarred tom, punctuating his expressions with "Quits" and "Don'ts" and using a more growly inflection. Flowerkit hadn't noticed, but Jake had; the rogue found himself in a constant state of bemusement. Not that he showed it.

"I'll mock you when I want, shrimp." Jake swished his tail.

"Don't call me shrimp," Flowerkit muttered.

Jake pretended not to hear. "You have to get closer to your target before you can pounce. You ain't a puma."

"Oh." Frowning, Flowerkit stood and walked toward the leaf, pausing less than a tail-length away. Before he could sink into his hunting crouch, however, something crashed into his side, sending the kit sprawling. All the breath was knocked out of him and he closed his eyes, dazed. Something pressed down on his chest.

When he recovered enough to open his eyes, Flowerkit found himself staring up into Jake's furiously twisted expression. The rogue had one paw placed against Flowerkit's heart, pinning him

down.

"And just what," Jake hissed, "is the whole point of a hunting crouch if you're just gonna *walk up to it?*"

"Let me go," Flowerkit gasped. The pressure on his chest reminded him forcibly of Mosskit, and he felt another familiar spike of hatred, this time towards Jake. The kit glared up at him until the filthy tom let him up.

After picking himself up off the ground, Flowerkit turned toward his unofficial guardian with teeth bared. "You're a *horrible* mentor!" the black kitten screamed. "I could learn better on my own!"

Jake's yellow eye flashed with anger. "You think you're so smart, don't you, little Clanner? Fine. Do it on your own, then. I won't help you," he snarled.

"Fine! I will!" Flowerkit yowled back. He whirled and stalked away angrily, his tail straight up as though he didn't have a care in the world for the cat he was walking away from.

Flowerkit continued walking until Jake was out of sight among the trees, then he let himself taste the air. The scents were confusing; all he could really smell was himself and something rotting in the undergrowth nearby. A short exploration revealed the rotting thing to be a small tree fruit. Flowerkit returned his attention to the hunt and wandered further away, trying to cross a prey-scent, but he encountered nothing, and soon found himself relying on his other senses instead.

Finally, a rustle in the bushes nearby alerted him to the presence of a small animal. Flowerkit eagerly dropped into his new crouch, his amber gaze glued to the bush and his ears pricked forward, straining for the slightest sound. Very slowly, a young mouse emerged. Flowerkit held his breath. The little rodent shuffled around in the grass a bit before picking up a tiny seed and bringing it up to its snout. This was Flowerkit's chance, while it was distracted. He took a slow, agonizing step forward, determined to catch the mouse... and promptly placed his paw down on a dead leaf.

The ensuing crackle of noise sent the mouse scurrying back under the cover of the bush. Cursing, Flowerkit tried to nose his way after it, but he couldn't push through the spiky wooden branches. He attempted circling the bush, to see if the mouse had run through to the other side, but it seemed to be staying where it was safe and sheltered under the bush. Flowerkit stomped around for a while before finally abandoning it.

He tried two more times to catch something; a bird he had been following saw him almost immediately and sought shelter in the highest bough of a birch tree, and the second mouse had apparently felt his pawsteps through the ground because it too ran off before Flowerkit could get close. Eventually Flowerkit had to admit that it was getting too dark to hunt any longer and that he would have to return.

Back at Jake's impromptu den, a small furrow in the earth beneath the roots of an oak (Flowerkit had to sleep outside), the rogue was already curled up in his nest. Flowerkit sighed and stretched out on the other side of the tree, so that he couldn't see the dirty-furred tom. (By now Flowerkit's own pelt had accumulated quite a bit of grime, but he didn't mind. According to Jake, grooming was a kittypet thing to do.) Ignoring the rumbly pangs of hunger from his stomach, he slowly drifted off to sleep.

Flowerkit woke up the next morning with a ravenous appetite. Jake had already left the den site, and there was no convenient vole placed in front of him, so Flowerkit decided that the rogue must be honoring his promise not to hunt for him anymore.

Flowerkit turned to the task of hunting with new energy, fueled by the insistent demands of his empty tummy. He opened his jaws to scent his surroundings, letting the air currents touch the glands on the roof of his mouth. His nose twitched instinctively. It smelled like air. Finally he deciphered the scent of a warm, living creature and became excited because of how strong the scent was. He tried his hand at following the scent, moving around the trunk of oak... and realized it was Jake's old scent from where he had slept. Flowerkit scowled and moved off.

Deeper in the forest, Flowerkit followed the trill of birdsong, only to

watch in frustration as a pair of chickadees hopped around in the highest branches of a slim birch. He couldn't climb trees yet. Continuing on, he tried chasing a ginger-furred squirrel into his claws, but it too sought refuge in a tree. With loud grumbles from both his throat and his belly, Flowerkit finally abandoned his hunt and went to find Jake.

The rogue wasn't surprised to see him empty-pawed. He teased the kit at first - "What, no prey threw itself into your claws, O Great Warrior?" - but eventually grew tired of it when Flowerkit proved too tired to react much more than with a growl and a glare. The black furred kitten was suffering a heartbreaking bout of homesickness. Ashenbird had never let him go hungry.

"If you're so hungry, why don't you just go back crying to those Clan cats to feed you?" Jake asked later, having heard a particularly noisy gurgle from Flowerkit's belly.

"I can't," Flowerkit murmured in a depressed tone. He couldn't face the other kits, not now. Now that they knew how weak he was... That he had run away from them... He couldn't go crawling back.

He had been hoping to do other stuff today, too, like resting and exploring and maybe even getting Jake to show him some battle moves (though Flowerkit wondered how good at fighting the rogue could possibly be, considering all the scars he had collected). However as the day wore on and his hunger grew worse, the kit realized that continuing to try and hunt for himself was a must.

'Try' being the key word. No matter how many tiny creatures Flowerkit sought out, he couldn't succeed in catching a single one. He even became desperate enough to eat a small beetle he had found, though the crunchy shell made it difficult to chew and the aftertaste made him wish he hadn't. Plus it didn't quell the pangs in his stomach in the slightest.

As the sun inched closer to the horizon, Flowerkit stumbled back to the den site, his paws faltering with exhaustion and his empty stomach gnawing painfully on his insides. This was it, he thought miserably. Soon he would pass out or collapse to the ground in starvation. Most likely he would curl up to sleep and never wake up

again, not having enough energy to open his eyes. Or his stomach would finally eat up the rest of him, leaving nothing but a pile of bones. Either way, he was about to perish...

Then he stepped into view of the den site and saw a perfect, plump mouse placed beside the spot where Flowerkit slept, freshly caught and killed, just *waiting* for the kitten to gobble it up. Which he did, no questions asked. Jake wasn't even around to ask questions.

Finally, with a warm, full belly and a purr starting to rumble up from his chest, Flowerkit licked clean his whiskers and nestled himself happily between the roots of the oak tree. He was asleep instantly.

When the sky was light enough that Flowerkit couldn't sleep any longer, he found Jake already up and watching him with a narrowed eye as he half-heartedly washed his face. Flowerkit bounded up to him, all his energy renewed and his spirits returned to him.

"I hope you enjoyed that mouse last night, shorty. It's the last time I'm hunting for you."

"I did, actually. Thanks," Flowerkit replied, flashing the rogue a wide grin. He was determined not to let the scarred tom bother him today.

Jake hrr-umphed.

"Can we do some battle training today? You must know some moves, right?" Flowerkit asked, his tail high with excitement.

Jake refused. "You really think you could fight another *cat* if you can't even catch a *mouse*?"

Flowerkit forcefully stifled the following wave of irritation. "That'll change soon," he vowed, waving his tail. "I'm getting better. I just about had that shrew last night before it ran underground."

"Sure you did," Jake grunted. He stood and stretched out all four limbs before turning his back on the kit. "Well, I'm going to catch *myself* some breakfast... See you later, shrimp."

Flowerkit watched as Jake padded away, a plan already starting to form in his mind. The rogue had decided he wouldn't teach the clan kit, but that didn't mean Flowerkit couldn't learn from him... The black tom waited until Jake was well out of sight, then quietly started to follow. He slunk, shadow-like, through the forest, keeping Jake's scent fresh in his nose but staying far enough back that Jake couldn't see him.

Soon Flowerkit had to stumble back when he peered out from around a tree to see that the rogue had stopped and was staring intently at a clump of dead leaves on the ground, his ears pricked and alert. A chill breeze weaved over the earth and the leaves shivered. Flowerkit inhaled the mouth-watering scent of mouse. He watched as Jake lowered his body to the ground, his underfur just shy of brushing the dirt. His tail was held steady and level behind him. The rogue took two slow paces forward, moving silently, closing the distance between himself and the clump of leaves. Flowerkit noticed that the older tom's paws made no sound when coming into contact with the ground. Finally Jake sunk even lower into his crouch, letting his belly touch the earth. His tail twitched madly, and he rocked back onto his haunches - suddenly the rogue was in the air, his forepaws outstretched and his claws glinting as they squarely hit the dead leaves. A pained squeaking filled the air, and Jake bent his head to recover his prize. He straightened to show a limp mouse dangling from his jaws.

Flowerkit looked on in awe. For all of his nonexistant teaching skills, Jake was, in fact, an excellent hunter. At that moment the rogue looked his way - and, seeing the kit crouching half-hidden behind a tree, narrowed his yellow eye and stalked away, leaving Flowerkit with quite a bit to think about.

The black-furred tom mulled over what he had seen and absently licked his shoulder. He tried to recreate Jake's crouch in his mind, and how each individual step was soft and silent. Flowerkit moved himself into a similar position. He placed one paw down in front of him, but this time he spread his toes and focused on letting the fur around his pads cushion his paw. Something was still off, though, as he tried to take another step. His weight was wrong, so he shifted it into his back paws, but then he couldn't make those paws silent, so

he shifted his weight back into his front paws. The result was somewhat similar to a caterpillar's crawl and extremely awkward. Flowerkit restarted and tried again, this time letting his weight rest somewhere in the middle. He let his belly grow heavy and his limbs become light. It worked better - this time he took three absolutely soundless pawsteps before he lost his balance and toppled over. The kit tried one more time, and on this attempt, his weight settled a bit more naturally into his haunches. He had to concentrate to keep it there, but he found he could maneuver much more easily and did a few practice runs with his new hunting crouch.

Soon he felt ready to try it on real prey. Flowerkit snuffled around the area where Jake had caught his mouse, but he couldn't distinguish any other prey scents, so he wandered until a fresh, strong scent hit his nose: a shrew!

Flowerkit glanced about for the source of the scent, and spotted it rooting through the undergrowth. With a sly grin the rogue kitten sunk into his crouch, letting his weight rest in his haunches and forcing his tail to be still. He took four light steps and sprung on the unsuspecting creature.

His claws curled around the warm body of the shrew, pinning it to his paws. Flowerkit stood, elation filling him as he looked at the prey squirming in his claws. He almost let it escape before quickly remembering to actually kill it, and he bent his head to take its life with a gentle bite to the neck.

It took all of Flowerkit's willpower not to gobble up his first ever catch immediately. Only his pride kept him from taking a huge bite. He wanted to show off his first prey to a certain disbelieving rogue who thought Flowerkit couldn't take care of himself.

Back at their makeshift camp, Jake was already there, lazily chewing on his own catch. Flowerkit could feel Jake's gaze on him as he walked into sight proudly carrying his shrew, but the kit purposefully didn't look at him. He just silently strode over to his spot and then happily started eating up his prey. When he snuck a glance over at the older rogue, he saw that Jake was ignoring him too. Flowerkit couldn't help a surge of pride that he had proved Jake wrong. He really could hunt. And now he wouldn't ever have

to rely on anyone else to feed him ever again.

When Flowerkit had finished eating, he stood and strutted over to Jake, who was sitting and drawing a paw along his whiskers. It was pretty much the only part of him the rogue would wash. Flowerkit cleared his throat, but Jake didn't look up, forcing Flowerkit to be the first one to speak.

"So I can hunt now," Flowerkit meowed.

Jake grunted, not pausing in his grooming.

"Will you teach me to fight?"

Finally Jake looked at him, his one yellow eye narrowed as he stared down at the kit. There was a long heartbeat of silence.

"I suppose so. Couldn't hurt," Jake huffed, shuffling to his paws. He leered, and the scars on his face threw strange shadows over his expression. "We wouldn't want the shrimp to be *too* useless in a fight, now do we?"

Flowerkit bristled, but Jake waved him off with his tail. "Alright, alright. I'll teach ya. Right here, right now, kitten. Let's see what you got." When Flowerkit just stood there, waiting, Jake growled. "Well, what are you waitin' for? Attack me."

Flowerkit blinked, then bundled himself up into a crouch. He thrust with his hind legs and sprung into the air, claws outstretched... and promptly got swatted to the side by one of Jake's huge paws. The rogue snorted.

"You really are useless. Look, kit, you're so tiny it's not a problem for any cat to fend you off when you're so obvious with your attacks. You've got to get in close, attack as fast as possible and inflict as much damage as you can onto your opponent before getting out of range of their counter attack. That's the only way you'll win. Try again."

Flowerkit readied himself for a second attempt, keeping all of Jake's words firmly in his head. This time he faked a run for Jake's side, and as the larger tom moved to defend himself, Flowerkit leapt

towards his opposite, exposed side and ran his claws through Jake's fur. The rogue's mats and tangles caught Flowerkit's claws, but he retracted them and ducked underneath Jake to bite at his hind leg instead. His jaws clamped harmlessly over Jake's limb and then Flowerkit scrambled back, out of the way before his opponent could turn to bat him aside again.

Jake appraised the crouched kit with his single yellow eye, considering. "Not bad, I suppose," he grunted. "I didn't even have to teach you to feint, so good job. However," he continued, "your enemies won't be deterred by a little scratch on the side and a sore leg. Nor will they stop to tell you what you did wrong. They're going to keep coming after you, again and again, and they're *not* going to let you stop and rest. So whatever you do, shrimp, don't let yourself get pinned, because you'll be dead. Got it?"

"Got it," Flowerkit muttered, hoping he could remember all that.

"Now attack again, and this time I won't stop to give you space."

Flowerkit threw himself at Jake, feinting to both sides before diving under his belly and twisting to rake his claws over the soft underside. He could hear Jake growl and sensed the rogue about to flatten him, but Flowerkit rolled out from under the bigger cat, tripping up Jake's hind legs in the process and sending Jake sprawling. But that didn't keep him down long; Jake was up and fighting again before Flowerkit could catch his breath. The small tom dodged Jake's swiping paws, continuously moving backwards, and looked for an opening to attack, but the rogue didn't give him one. Then Flowerkit was sent flying when Jake managed to hit him with a powerful side swipe. As Flowerkit struggled to regain his paws, Jake forced him back to the ground and held him down.

"You really aren't too bad at this, shrimp. If your claws had really gotten my belly, I might actually be hurt right now. But you're still too slow to recover." Jake let Flowerkit up and nudged him to his feet. "Again."

They continued sparring in a similar manner, Flowerkit attacking his mentor and then defending himself from Jake's attacks. He found that battling came naturally to him, and he was quick to

target all of Jake's vulnerable spots. After Jake was sporting a new scratch on his cheek and Flowerkit was bleeding from the side, they outlawed claws, but Flowerkit still fought full-out.

Finally the sun hung too low on the horizon for them to train any longer; it kept glaring in their eyes whenever they turned their heads west. Plus Flowerkit was exhausted. He didn't even bother trying to hunt before he retired for the day, he simply curled up in his nest and had passed out the same heartbeat his eyes slid closed.

The next few days passed much the same. Flowerkit would wake up to hunt, some days faring prosperously, while other days he would go to sleep hungry, unable to catch any prey. It wasn't easy for Flowerkit, but it was manageable. In the afternoons, he and Jake would practice battling until Flowerkit got either too tired or too hungry and made another attempt at hunting. And in any spare time he had, the pure black kitten would be napping. Each day got a little colder, and the leaves on the trees turned color, setting the scenes for Jake and Flowerkit's practice battles with vibrant reds and golds.

Jake actually seemed impressed with Flowerkit's fighting skills. His mocking behaviour and derogative remarks became less common and Flowerkit even got the impression that the dirty-furred rogue enjoyed sparring with him.

After all, Flowerkit had incentive enough to improve his fighting skills. Every time Jake's paw landed on his chest, or he snapped out a cruel comment, thoughts of Mosskit and the other ThunderClan bullies would fill his mind, and the anger that came with it would push him to fight harder every time.

# Chapter Nine - Claws In The Back

[image]

**Chapter Nine**
**Claws In The Back**

Flowerkit was lost in a whirlwind of fur and claws.

He ducked backward as powerful paws swept in a deadly course towards his head, again and again, forcing Flowerkit to continuously move back. Suddenly his paws were swept out from under him, sending the kit tumbling onto his side. He sensed the cat above him rear back, about to strike, but this time Flowerkit was quicker; he used his size to his advantage and rolled out of the way, springing to his feet just as Jake's paws slammed the ground where he had been a heartbeat before.

There was no time for pause. Flowerkit launched himself at his attacker, battering Jake's side with as many blows as he could land before he rolled out of the way again, teeth bared to match his opponent's snarl.

Jake lunged again, his gaze locked with Flowerkit's. Flowerkit darted nimbly to the side then spun, expecting another attack. To his surprise, there wasn't one. Jake was standing stiffly, his head turned to look at a spot in the distance with his ears alert. Flowerkit hesitated. Was this some new tactic to catch him off guard? Well he wouldn't fall for it! He prepared to spring again, a challenging yowl about to rumble up from his throat - when suddenly a heavy paw crushed him to earth. "Shut up and get down," Jake hissed in his ear.

"Mrrrr-ow! No!" Flowerkit spat back, struggling to get back to his feet.

Jake's tail slapped over his muzzle. "I said shut up," he repeated in a

low hiss. He was still looking in the same direction, away from Flowerkit. "There are other cats near."

That made Flowerkit fall silent. He shoved Jake's tail away, then crouched down, his heart beating heavily in his ears from the exertion but straining his senses anyway. Soon he caught what Jake had picked up on already: the sound of voices. At first they were just a mumble, too far away for Flowerkit to distinguish what they were saying, but the voices drifted closer until he could just barely pick up on their conversation.

"...Are they sure he's really out here somewhere? How could a tiny kit survive on his own for so long?"

"Sagepaw said she found Flowerkit's scent when she had accidentally strayed too far while hunting." The same voice said something else, too quiet for Flowerkit to catch. But he had heard enough already. They were talking about him! His fur bristled slightly. It must be a ThunderClan patrol, searching once more for the kitten who had run away.

"But there are all sorts of rogue cats and other predators out here. Even if he hasn't died of starvation already, how has he not been killed or eaten?"

"Maybe that kit is just better than we give him credit for."

The voices continued, now moving away, and soon Flowerkit couldn't hear them anymore. His muscles slowly relaxed and he looked up at Jake. "I guess ThunderClan is still looking for me."

Jake's yellow eye looked troubled. "Suppose so. Lesson's over, kid. I'll meet you back at the den later." And all of a sudden, Jake was gone.

Flowerkit blinked, staring at the spot where the rogue had disappeared. That was weird behaviour, even for him. Was Jake afraid of the ThunderClan patrol, maybe? Flowerkit shook his head. That didn't make any sense. Jake wouldn't have anything to worry about from them in the first place. He wasn't on ThunderClan territory, so the warriors would have no right to attack. Flowerkit

sighed and sat down. It would probably be best to lay low for a while, while the patrol was in the area. The kitten did not plan on being found and dragged back to ThunderClan at this point. He was a committed rogue himself, now. And there was no way he could return and face the other kits again.

All few hours later the patrol had long gone and Flowerkit found himself back at his and Jake's nest site. The ThunderClan cats hadn't come anywhere close to it, but Jake still wasn't there. Flowerkit pushed around stones, bored, until someone stepped into his line of vision.

"Come on. We're doing a field trip for training today," Jake grunted.

Flowerkit stood. "Field trip?"

The large white tom swished his tail. "Just come on," he growled. "I'm going to show you something."

Eyes round with curiosity, Flowerkit followed. He ended up padding along at Jake's heels as the older tom led him through the forest. Jake was still acting strangely, Flowerkit thought. He wouldn't quite meet the kit's eyes and he seemed tense, his tail swishing back and forth as though worried. But Jake's scarred and emotionless face gave Flowerkit no clues to his thoughts.

After what seemed like a long time walking, Flowerkit was just about to open his mouth to complain about his sore and tired paws when Jake suddenly halted. His ears twitched and he scanned the area quickly with his good eye. The rogue looked sideways at Flowerkit. "Wait here. I need to find something." And with no more instructions then that, Jake disappeared once more into the trees.

He seemed to do that a lot all of a sudden, Flowerkit reflected, his claws digging into the dirt with annoyance. He was tired and didn't like being left in the dark. He still had no idea what he and Jake were out here for and if that dirty-furred rogue thought he would just stay put like some obedient puppy, he was wrong.

Flowerkit lifted his nose and sniffed. As long as Jake was leaving him to his own devices, he might as well hunt. Perhaps there would

some easy mice nearby that he could catch. The kitten started to wander, searching for any signs of prey.

It didn't take long before a strange noise made him pause again. He tilted his head, pricking one ear to try and catch the sound. There is was again. A sort of mewl. Did mice mewl? Maybe it was a rabbit... He tried following the sound and nearly stumbled over a large hole.

The gap in the earth opened inconspicuously by the roots of a large tree. Flowerkit narrowed his eyes, peering into it. It seemed to extend down under the tree. A tunnel of some sorts? Or a den? The whole setup reminded him of the prisoner's hole in the ShadowClan camp. His ears twitched when he heard the mewl again, coming from the tunnel. There was definitely something in there.

The sounds of swishing fur and the snap of a twig from behind him sent Flowerkit whirling. He blinked and found himself looking at a black nose attached to a long, russet muzzle, and from either side of the muzzle peered at him the dark, beady eyes of a fox.

Flowerkit yelled and stumbled back, his paw twisting when he misstepped into the tunnel entrance. He had never seen a fox before, but Ashenbird had told him bone-chilling stories about the blood-thirsty beasts... their thick, red fur... the bushy tail held low over the ground... the menace in their eyes... and their long fangs, meant for snapping and tearing, which the fox was right now baring at him.

Flowerkit just barely managed to throw himself to the side before the fox's jaws clamped over the air where the kitten had been a heartbeat before. Flowerkit's pulse raced. He must have stumbled onto the fox's den. And inside the den, that mewling sound... must be the fox's kits. Now the male fox facing him was about to kill the intruder that threatened his mate and kits.

The fox lunged for Flowerkit again, teeth snapping, but fear lent him speed and he managed to scramble out of the way. He tried to swipe his claws at the fox's muzzle, and it just knocked his paw aside before attacking again. He was once again in a whirlwind of fur and teeth and claws, but this time his life was on the line. There was no way Flowerkit could fight this monster with the death it

promised in its eyes. His only chance was to run.

Flowerkit turned tail and sprinted, his ears flattened against his skull and his tail streaming out behind him. He could feel the fox's breath hot on his heels as it gave pursuit, and suddenly pain jolted through Flowerkit's spine. The beast's fangs had found their mark on Flowerkit's tail.

The young cat screamed in pain, turning and lashing out blindly at his attacker. He felt his claws rake across the fox's nose, the soft black skin tearing, and the russet monster reared back with a snarl. Flowerkit ran once more, the pain in his tail spurring him to move faster. He weaved through the trees, desperately pushing through the undergrowth, using any method at his disposal to shake off his attacker. Eventually the pursuit began to slacken, but Flowerkit kept running. He didn't stop until he the footfalls behind him stopped completely and the fox issued a loud, warning howl. It would let the kitten go for now, but the next time it found him anywhere near its den, the cat would be dead. This knowledge kept Flowerkit moving, even when he had left the fox and its den site far behind.

Finally he could not continue any longer. His breaths came in short panting bursts and there was a painful stitch in his side from running. His paws ached from slamming against the ground repeatedly and he was bleeding from where two thorns had found their way into his fur. Plus he thought he was about to pass out from the pain radiating from his tail. The kitten dreaded looking back at it, in case it was a horrid twist of mangled fur and blood, but he had to know. To his relief his tail appeared fine other than a small patch of bloodied fur from a shallow piercing. Flowerkit let out his breath in a huff. It looked like he would be fine. He collapsed to the ground, stretching out his paws in hopes that the stitch in his side would leave him and he could get his breath back.

As he gradually recovered, Flowerkit felt anger bubbling up inside him. Jake had *known* about the fox den. He had brought him there on purpose. Jake had tried to *kill* him! That backstabbing, traitorous, filthy rogue! Flowerkit should have known. He should never had trusted that one-eyed turnpelt. He should never had trusted anyone but himself. Because everyone, *everyone* always

betrayed him in the end. Flowerkit closed his eyes, letting himself succumb to sleep with revenge in his thoughts.

# Chapter Ten - Lost Leaves

[image]

**Chapter Ten**
**Lost Leaves**

It had been three days since Flowerkit had escaped the fox.

Three days of living in a haze, tired, hungry, and lost. Three days of traveling in circles, gradually losing hope of finding anything familiar. Of scanning the trees for a landmark he might have seen before. Of searching for any sign of Jake or another cat he knew. And there was nothing.

To make matters worse, the forest around him was changing before his eyes. The leafy canopy above him was dominated by yellows and reds instead of standard green, and some trees had no leaves at all, just bare branches outlined against the sky. The days were growing colder. Chilly breezes wound through the forest, sending loose leaves dancing and making Flowerkit shiver with the cold.

He remembered Ashenbird telling him a little bit about the changing of the seasons. He had been born in greenleaf, which meant that the weather was warm and mild and prey was plentiful. After greenleaf came leaf-fall, where the leaves fell and all the forest was busy preparing for leaf-bare which, according to Ashenbird, was horribly cold and where snow (little white specks that melted on your fur) fell from the sky like rain. Then new-leaf would come and everything went back to normal. This had to be leaf-fall, Flowerkit thought, watching with little interest as a gust of wind sent big brown leaves scattering in front of him.

The blown leaves made so much noise that Flowerkit almost missed the young squirrel dashing through them, carrying a small pinecone. It was either completely oblivious to Flowerkit's presence or just too stupid about the danger he posed. Instinctively Flowerkit sprang forward, his claws outstretched. He missed the squirrel and it chattered in surprise, starting to run away, but Flowerkit

recovered faster and slammed his paw down on its tail. The squirrel pulled free, leaving only a few shreds of fur in Flowerkit's claws. The furious kitten charged after it as it ran for the nearest tree and launched itself onto the trunk. However, Flowerkit was close enough behind it that as the squirrel hit the bark Flowerkit's claws hit the squirrel and he dragged it back down. After a brief struggle the squirrel went limp and Flowerkit, his chest heaving, held his prize proudly in his jaws. He lied down right where he was and began to eat.

It hadn't been too hard to find food for himself the past few days, as most of the small mammals were so intent on gathering food for the winter that it was easy to sneak up on them. However, Flowerkit's hunting skills were still weak and most of his hunts were messy ones, when he caught the prey at all. But he was surviving, so that was good enough for him.

Later, as the sun began to set, Flowerkit curled up at the base of a beech tree full with golden leaves, his fur fluffed up against the cold. It was difficult to fall asleep because he kept shivering, but the small tom was so exhausted from wandering all day that finally he just gave up on trying to stay warm and let sleep overcome him.

His dreams were a confusing jumble of darkened images. Voices echoed in his ears, cutting out and ringing back strongly with words that Flowerkit couldn't make sense of. *"Under the... darkness..."* In his dream, all was black, except for a pair of orange eyes blinking at him from the shadows. *"Under the cover of darkness..."* The eyes disappeared, and Flowerkit looked down to see blood pooling under his paws, staining the black fur around his claws a dark crimson. *"Petals..."* Suddenly a mass of scarlet leaves swirled around Flowerkit, obscuring his vision. He cried out, and he heard someone call his name in return. In the gaps between the leaves still circling around him, he saw what had to Ashenbird and he yelled out for her, but the leaves battered back at him and he couldn't run towards his mother. Flowerkit was crying out again when all of a sudden the air stilled and the leaves dropped, leaving the kit surrounded by unbroken darkness. *"Blood-red petals will fall."*

The next morning, Flowerkit blinked open his eyes to discover that the world had turned golden and he also could not breathe. The kit

gasped and sat up, and as he did so multiple somethings slid off of him and he found himself sitting in a massive pile of loose yellow leaves. The world had not, in fact, turned to solid gold. Confused, Flowerkit gazed skyward. The beech he was under had shed every last one of its leaves during the night and they had blanketed him as he slept. The tree's bare branches made it seem almost vulnerable.

Grumbling, Flowerkit stood, shaking the last few leaves from his pelt. It was time to keep moving.

Pawstep after pawstep Flowerkit walked, his movement due more to momentum really than his own strength. He plodded along the forest floor of broken leaves with certain deadness in his eyes. He was hungry, he was tired, he was cold, and underneath it all, a desperate loneliness had engulfed the tiny black ThunderClan kitten.

He didn't know his purpose anymore.

Flowerkit stopped walking. "I- I'm lost," he sniffled. Then, louder, "I'm lost! Ashenbird, where are you?"

A raven cawed loudly overhead. Startled out of his tears, Flowerkit looked up, his gaze seeking out the large black bird. It was huddled on a bare overhanging branch, outlined starkly against the autumn sky, and it seemed to be watching Flowerkit with its beady eyes. It jerked its beak when it saw that the cat had noticed it. The raven spread its wings to their full extent, showing off its impressive wingspan, and cawed shrilly once more. Slowly, it tipped over, and fell into a dive, pulling out just in time to skim over Flowerkit's head before gliding deeper into the trees. The kit could still see it as it fluttered into another tree to perch there. Its beady eyes met Flowerkit's once again.

Flowerkit wasn't sure if it was curiosity, pure loneliness, or just anger at nearly being dive-bombed that made him follow the bird.

He turned and padded after it, his tail twitching with more interest than he had shown since escaping from the fox's den. His ears were pricked forward, his orange eyes a little more alert than before. The

raven cawed and flew to the next tree.

The chase went on, with the raven flapping from tree to tree and Flowerkit running after it. They zigzagged through the forest, and just when Flowerkit was starting to feel as though he was completely wasting his time and energy his paw caught on a protruding tree root and the kit was sent sprawling. The raven winged away out of sight, cawing raucously as though to laugh at him.

Spitting curses, Flowerkit regained his feet and stopped to brush the dirt off of his whiskers. It was then that he noticed a distant roar of noise that he hadn't been aware of while he was running. Curious once more, he trotted a few steps forward... And found himself blocked by a high barrier of strange silver threads.

The trees gave way to this odd barrier, and on the other side of the threads was a square, boxed-in clearing containing even stranger objects and on the other side of the clearing was a solid gray wall. Flowerkit's fur bristled. He had never seen such bizarre structures, but he had a feeling that twolegs were involved.

Ashenbird had told him a little bit about the peculiar creatures. They were tall, with unnaturally colored fur except for their hands and faces, and traveled in the bellies of monsters. They made outrageously large dens for themselves out of unfamiliar materials and sometimes even kept cats as *pets.* Flowerkit shivered to think that he had stumbled upon one of their dens.

But he couldn't turn away now that he had found something so strange. It needed to be explored NOW.

He cautiously reached out and tapped the silver thread-like barrier with a paw. The threads were hard, but the whole wall of threads wobbled from his touch. Flowerkit jumped back in surprise. It didn't look like he could push through it, and he didn't have nearly enough courage to try climbing it. He looked around for another point of entry, and noticed that further along the silver barrier changed to a wooden one. He trotted over and tapped it. This one remained unmoved. The kitten's teeth showed in a satisfied grin. He could probably climb this one.

He reached up, placed his paws on the wall, and dug his claws into the wood. In a swift motion he leaped up, found purchase with his back claws, and pushed up again. In no time at all he was at the top of the wooden fence. He was a little surprised to find that the tops of the strips of wood tapered into points, but he found that he could still balance fairly easily.

In shock Flowerkit realized that the square of grass he was looking at was not the same as he had seen through the silver thread fence. It was a different clearing entirely, backing onto a different twoleg den.

Flowerkit twitched his whiskers. This definitely needed more investigation. He walked slowly along the top of the wooden barricade, avoiding the pointy tips, and followed the fence when it changed direction to go towards the huge den thing. Yet another fenced-in square of grass could be seen on the other side.

The small black cat followed the fence until he reached a point where he could jump onto the top of the twoleg den and get a higher viewpoint. It was an easy distance to leap, but the roof's surface was slanted and he nearly slid off before finding his balance again. The top of the den was covered in weird stone-like squares that Flowerkit couldn't dig his claws into, and it felt unsafe. Very cautiously he picked his way to the edge of the roof, on the opposite side from the square clearing, and his heart thudded when he saw what awaited.

Laid out in front of him was the sprawling maze of the twolegplace.

# Chapter Eleven - New World, New Rules

[image]

**Chapter Eleven**
**New World, New Rules**

Flowerkit gaped at the strange new world that was sprawled out in front of him. Huge twoleg dens were lined up in neat rows that ran further than the small kitten could see. Each one had slight differences of color and decor, but they were all roughly the same shape and size. Small trees were interspersed between the structures in orderly fashion. There was a wide ribbon of gray stone dividing the lines of houses, and as Flowerkit watched, a huge colored *thing* went roaring past, running swiftly along the path on round black paws that rolled continuously. Flowerkit jumped back in fright, though he was well out of the monster's reach, and it zoomed out of sight only seconds later.

The kitten crouched down against the roof, his heart pounding against his chest. He stayed huddled there until his breathing calmed and his pulse slowed before gradually straightening up and taking another look at his surroundings.

The air itself in this place *hummed;* he could feel it along his whiskers and through his paws. The bright colors and ordered structures were unnatural, nothing like he had seen before. And though all there was in front of him were huge dens and a few trees, in the distance he could see even taller structures looming against the skyline.

Eventually Flowerkit gathered the courage to abandon his safe rooftop perch and explore this strange world. He made his way over to the edge of the roof, careful not to slip on the slanted surface, and peered over the edge. There was a neat rectangle of green grass below him that looked safe enough, but he was too high to jump down, so he turned his attention to his point of entry - the wall of

wooden slats. He could safely jump down from that.

Flowerkit had just regained his balance on the fence when a rectangular piece of the twoleg den swung open and a twoleg stepped out. They locked eyes, the twoleg blinking at the kitten with mild surprise and Flowerkit staring back with undisguised horror and shock. It was hideous! The weirdest creature he had ever seen!

The twoleg stepped towards him, making high-pitched squeaky noises, and Flowerkit wasted no time getting out of there. He started running the same heartbeat his paws hit the grass, sprinting away from the terrifying beast. He ran out onto the stone path and looked up just in time to see another of the huge shiny monsters bearing down on him. It belched out a noise like thunder, and Flowerkit scrambled out of the way, barely avoiding being crushed by the rolling black paws. He crossed the road and ended up on a narrower path of lighter gray, which he ran along blindly, fleeing as though hell itself was on his tail. He turned the corner as the road diverged and nearly ran into the feet of another twoleg, this one walking along the sidewalk holding a rope... which was attached to the neck of a large, shaggy white dog. It let out a deep, throaty bark and Flowerkit skittered sideways, trying to evade it. The dog pulled against its restraining rope, barking at full volume. Flowerkit saw, as though in slow motion, as the rope was tugged out of the twoleg's hand. The freed beast howled a challenge and the chase was on, with Flowerkit running as fast as he could while the dog's paws pounded against the sidewalk behind him, its hot, stinky breath right on his tail. *"StarClan save me!"* Flowerkit yowled, swerving frantically in an attempt to lose the beast.

Suddenly a lean dark shape darted out in front of him and despair gripped Flowerkit's heart at the thought of yet another enemy to face. But this creature proved to be feline, and the tall dark tom wasted no time. "Follow me," he ordered, and Flowerkit was more than happy to oblige.

The strange cat led Flowerkit at a run around the side of the closest twoleg den. The dog pounded after them, barking with renewed excitement at having two victims to chase. Flowerkit couldn't imagine being any more terrified than he was. He slipped and

scrambled after his potential rescuer, anticipating with dread for the dog's fangs to sink into his tail just as the fox's had not too many days ago. His heart dropped when they turned the corner and were faced with another high wooden-plank wall, blocking their path.

But the black tom he was following didn't stop. The stranger lunged into a small gap at the base of the fence that Flowerkit hadn't noticed and wriggled through to the other side. Flowerkit hastily followed. The wooden slats scraped his back and dirt crumbled under his claws, but it only took a heartbeat before he was through.

Flowerkit had just dropped into a crouch, breathing heavily, when the whole fence shuddered from a great impact. Through the gaps between the planks he could see the huge shaggy beast hit the fence again, howling despair and fury when it realized that it couldn't get through. It was much too big to fit through the hole the cats had slipped through, and it seemed to not have noticed it anyway. Flowerkit jumped back when the dog's huge claws rattled against the wood.

"Can it get through?" Flowerkit asked with a quavering voice, turning to get a good look at his rescuer for the first time.

"No," the tom said shortly. He was tall and lean, with short dark fur and cold yellow eyes that were narrowed condescendingly at Flowerkit. There was also a thick band of red material around his neck.

They waited tensely, watching the dog throw itself against the fence and howl until finally its twoleg arrived and, puffing, grabbed the dog's restraining rope. Flowerkit curiously noted that the twoleg's rope was attached to a band around the dog's neck quite similar to the one on his rescuer. The dog was reluctantly dragged away from the fence, and eventually its barks and howls dwindled into nothing.

Flowerkit found that he could suddenly breathe properly again--but it seemed he wasn't quite out of trouble just yet.

"Don't you know better than to run out in front of a dog?" the strange cat demanded. His voice was low and crisp, nothing like

Jake's gravelly meow. Flowerkit got the feeling that this tom strongly disliked him.

"I--I'm sorry," Flowerkit murmured, his ears flattened back against his head. "I didn't see it." He hesitated before continuing. "Thank you for saving me."

The dark tom simply narrowed his eyes even more. "If you belonged here, you would know how to get rid of a stupid beast like that one," he accused with a scathing tone. "You should go home before you get hurt." With that, the strange cat straightened up and promptly started walking away.

"H-hey, wait!" Flowerkit called frantically. "I don't know where I am. Can you help me?"

"No," the dark tom said shortly without looking back.

Flowerkit scampered after him. "Can I at least know your name?" he pleaded.

"No. And if you know what's good for you, you won't follow me." The tom leapt to the top of the fence - an impossibly high jump - and disappeared on the other side.

"But..." Flowerkit protested, though it was too late. The cat was gone.

Flowerkit growled and stamped his paw against the ground. "Great! Now what?" he spat, looking around with an angry orange glare. He was lost, that much was obvious, and even if he could find his way back to the forest he would *still* be lost. Looked like he was stuck in this accursed twolegplace until he could find some real help.

Grumbling, the rogue kitten squirmed his way back through the gap under the fence and out to the other side, once again facing the street. Flowerkit paused and listened, his senses straining for any sign of the dog that had chased him, but it was gone. The twoleg must have confined it, or at least taken it far enough away that it no longer posed a threat. Flowerkit shivered slightly at the thought of the twoleg. What kind of power must it have to control beasts as

fearsome as that dog? And was that a capability all twolegs had, or just a few of the stronger ones? It terrified the poor forest kitten just to think about it.

He took a moment to gather his strength before continuing on. He picked a direction at random and started padding the sidewalk, being careful not to run into the paws of any more twolegs, dogs, or metal monsters.

After a few minutes of walking, Flowerkit spotted another cat sprawled out on the stones in front of a twoleg den door. His ears perked up. Surely this cat could help him out.

The cat raised his head as Flowerkit approached. His large eyes were a startling red color, with very small pupils, and though his expression was non-threatening, the eyes still made Flowerkit pause. The cat looked a little ghostly, and his long, pale cream fur only added to that effect. He'd never seen a cat with such long hair. But he was definitely corporeal and to be honest, Jake's scarred features were much more scary, so Flowerkit shook off the shivers that had run up his spine and stepped forward.

"Um, excuse me," he mumbled, suddenly shy and not quite certain of what to say. "C- can you help me?"

The strange long-haired tom gave him a slow nod, but stayed silent. His round eyes were locked with Flowerkit's, apparently waiting for him to continue.

"I'm lost," Flowerkit offered, tail flicking anxiously.

"Hmmm," the cat rumbled, and slowly shifted into a sitting position to more comfortably stare at the kitten. "Then where's your living?"

Flowerkit blinked. "M-my what?"

"He means your house," a voice spoke up from behind him. Flowerkit jumped and whirled around to confront it. It was a dark blue tom with warm yellow eyes, who greeted the lost kitten with a cheerful smile. "You're lost, right? So where's your house?"

Flowerkit shifted his paws and looked from one cat to the other. He

didn't know what a house was, or a living, but he could kind of guess what the toms were asking. "I'm from the forest," he admitted finally. "Not, um, this twolegplace."

The blue-furred cat seemed surprised for a moment, but quickly recovered with a smile. "Ah, that must be why your coat is so messy. No house kitten would be as dirty as you are." He was beaming so brightly that Flowerkit wasn't sure whether or not to take offense. Meanwhile, the cream tom was still staring at him with those unnerving red eyes.

"Um... okay." Flowerkit's tail twitched uncertainly. "So... can you help me?"

The two strangers exchanged glances. "Well, I'm not exactly sure where the forest is, myself," the blue tom confessed. "But I'm sure someone in the band will! I'm Romeo, by the way," he introduced himself cheerfully. "And this is Ham Sandwich." He gestured to the cream tom with his tail.

Ham Sandwich nodded slowly.

Flowerkit's shoulders relaxed when Romeo didn't ask for *his* name; as strange as their names were, he still didn't really want to give out his own and get teased for it again.

"Anyways, the band will know how to get you home," Romeo assured the forest kitten. "Come on. We'll take you there."

# Chapter Twelve - The Band

**Chapter Twelve**
**The Band**

Flowerkit's fur bristled along his shoulders as he crouched at the edge of the stone monster-path, and he cringed back warily as two huge metal beasts sped past, buffeting him with hot air. On either side of him, his guides Romeo and Ham Sandwich barely blinked. They were at ease in this terrifying, unnatural, maze-like environment, and Flowerkit couldn't help but envy them.

Romeo's ears twitched, and a moment later his tail flickered, gesturing for them to cross. The now-familiar dread and apprehension of crossing gripped Flowerkit's chest, but he had no choice other than to trust Romeo's orders, so he followed as the pair of toms sprinted across the dangerous path. He always closed his eyes as he ran, certain that a monster would bear down on him at any moment, but only heartbeats later the ground under his paws changed and they were safe once again. Stepping onto a swathe of grass in front of a twoleg house, the kitten flopped over to try and catch his breath.

"It's not long now," Romeo told him encouragingly. "And I promise there are no more roads between here and the band."

Flowerkit just twitched his ears in acknowledgement. After a few minutes he got back to his paws and the three resumed their journey through the twolegplace.

They made their way past countless twoleg structures, navigating the twisting streets and shadowed alleyways with barely a pause. Flowerkit had a feeling that there was some sort of pattern to the area's layout, but he was unable to understand it.

"Hey Ham, Romeo," an unfamiliar voice called from above them as they turned down yet another alleyway. "What's with the kitten?"

Flowerkit looked up to see a short, pudgy she-cat resting at the top of the stone wall beside them. Her short fur was mostly white with small patches of ginger, and she had clear blue eyes that showed little to no interest in knowing the answer to her question. Her tail dangled over the edge of the wall, twitching lazily.

"Hello, Munchie," Romeo greeted cheerfully. He gestured to Flowerkit. "This young tom is lost. We were hoping someone in the band could help him."

The she-cat, Munchie, didn't seem impressed. She narrowed her eyes at Flowerkit. "He's kind of a squirt. M.C. might attack him."

"I'm sure we'll be fine," Romeo said with his ever-constant appeasing smile. He didn't seem at all fazed by the thought of his little protege being attacked. Flowerkit, on the other paw, was bristling.

"Suit yourself," Munchie meowed with a dismissive flick of her tail.

The three continued on, leaving the apathetic she-cat to her perch. Romeo seemed to notice Flowerkit's uneasiness and gave him an encouraging look. "Don't worry, my young friend. Everything will turn out just fine." Flowerkit couldn't decide if the blue tom was fearless or simply too stupid to care about danger. He was thinking probably the latter.

They took one more turn around the corner and were faced with a gaping hole in the side of a building. A whole section of the wall had crumbled away, giving way to a foreboding tunnel of darkness. The bricks on either side of the gap stuck out slightly, looking like the fangs of some nameless monster, waiting to gobble Flowerkit up. The kitten's fur rose along his spine. Though he could see nothing through the hole, he could sense movement inside, and it smelled of cats.

"Well, come on," Romeo prompted, and Flowerkit blinked in surprise to realize that his two guides had already slipped through the hole and Romeo had poked his head back out to check if the kitten was coming. Shaking off the shivers that had been sneaking up his spine, Flowerkit cautiously followed. He picked his way over the crumbling stone and mortar. The cat-scent was growing

stronger. Finally they emerged into a large, dim room, lit only by weak sunlight filtering through dirty window panes. Boxes were piled precariously up against the walls, most of them blanketed in a thick layer of dust. And everywhere, in the middle of various activities, were cats.

Flowerkit gaped. There must have been at least twenty cats scattered around the dusty room. It was like a little clan of its own, deep in the heart of the twolegplace.

A few felines gradually became aware of the newcomers' presences, and one or two padded over to greet Ham Sandwich and Romeo, who they seemed to know well. Others simply called out greetings from where they were, while the rest ignored them completely.

"Well, my young friend, welcome to the band," Romeo meowed, beaming in Flowerkit's direction. "What do you think?"

Before Flowerkit could reply, however, heavy paws slammed into his side and barreled him over. He was jarred against the hard wooden floor. Flowerkit yowled protest, wincing as his old somewhat-healed shoulder injury sent a lance of pain through his foreleg. He glared up into the face of a small brown and lilac tom with gleaming amber eyes. The offender grinned down at the kitten.

"What's this? It seems our kittypet friends have brought a stranger into our midst." The tom's grin turned into a more menacing expression of bared teeth. "Who are you?"

Thankfully, Romeo came to the rescue. The blue tom simply pressed Flowerkit's attacker back with a paw. "That's not necessary, M.C. This young tom is just looking for help."

The brown and lilac tom (M.C.?) immediately sat back and assumed an air of importance. "Aha! Is that so? Well, we'll just have to see. Hello, small kitten. I'm M.C. Catnip. I'm the leader of this motley group of felines."

"No you're not," a new cat spoke up. By this time Flowerkit and company had attracted quite a bit of attention, and most of the cats had drifted closer to see what was going on. Now some were calling

out their own opinions.

"Yeah, Catnip. The whole reason we joined this band was so that we wouldn't *have* a leader," another meowed irritably, swishing her tail.

A large, friendly-looking orange tom *mrrr-owed* with stifled laughter. "Why, if we wanted to get ordered around all the time, we'd just get ourselves a living!" This brought on a chorus of yowled agreement.

"Yeah, a living!"

"Haha! Who would want that?"

"Stupid furball."

M.C. Catnip's ears flattened back in irritation. "Well, *someone* had to greet our new guest," he snapped at the onlookers. More than a few of them rolled their eyes. M.C. gave his chest fur a quick lick to hide his embarrassment, then fixed Flowerkit with a narrowed gaze. "Well, little tom? Why are you here?"

Flowerkit's tail twitched anxiously. "I... I need help getting home," he stammered. All of the attention was making him nervous.

"And where would that home be?" M.C. questioned. "You don't look like you live with humans. Your fur is too messy."

"I'm from the forest," Flowerkit answered, ignoring the slight.

A murmur of surprise rippled through the gathered alley cats. M.C.'s ears pricked forward with renewed interest in his young visitor.

"The forest, you say?" The brown tom repeated, his eyes glimmering. "Well, well, well. We could get you back there easily enough, I suppose."

"Really?" Flowerkit asked, his eyes widening.

"Of course," M.C. Catnip said with a flip of his tail.

"Hang on," another voice called out. It belonged to an old gray she-

cat with long, matted fur, and a white tail and paws. Her eyes were a shade of red similar to Ham Sandwich's, except that one eye was squashed down in what appeared to be a permanent half-wink. Flowerkit immediately compared her to Mothwhisker, a grizzled but kind elderly she-cat from ThunderClan. The new cat was lying with her paws under her, and although her age was evident, her eyes were still bright and alert. "Returning you home to the forest is no big deal... However, if I were you, I wouldn't leave just yet."

Flowerkit's ears flattened back. "Why not?"

"Because the snow season is coming," the she-cat replied simply.

This brought on another wave of mumbling from the crowd. Cats started calling out "yeah, that's right!" and "stay here for snow season!"

M.C. Catnip nodded towards the elderly gray she-cat. "Quite right, Wink, so it is," he meowed, then turned back to look at Flowerkit with the same frustrating air of superiority. "My young friend, I do believe it would be best if you stayed here, with us, until the sun season comes again," he said matter-of-factly. "The forest can be harsh during the snow season."

"Stay... here?" Flowerkit echoed. He looked around at all of the cats gathered around him. Most were smiling at him, looking friendly and welcoming, save a few--Ham Sandwich, for one, still had that unreadable wide-eyed expression. Romeo was smiling encouragingly, and Wink (the she-cat who had first mentioned snow season) had a knowing glimmer in her eyes.

Maybe these cats could be his home for a while.

"Okay," Flowerkit said slowly. "I'll stay... for snow season."

M.C. Catnip grinned. "Excellent. Welcome to the band."

# Chapter Thirteen - Blooming Dusk

[image]

**Chapter Thirteen**
**Blooming Dusk**

Flowerkit slunk around the corner, keeping as close to the twoleg den as he could. He wanted to be as invisible as possible until he learned more about this strange world of the twolegplace.

All of the attention back with the band had been making him nervous, and cats had been asking him questions that he didn't want to answer -- especially questions about where he had come from, and his name. So after reassuring a slightly concerned Romeo that he could find his way back to them later, Flowerkit had slipped away to find some peace and quiet where he could think about everything that had happened.

He looked up, searching for high ground that he could access. He'd liked being on the roof of the first twoleg den that he had come across. It had seemed safely removed from the dangers of the ground. He had traveled to the housing area, but as far as he could see, there weren't any low roofs that he jump to. He eyed the nearest fence uncertainly. It was made of wood and was low enough that he could jump up to, so maybe that would do.

Flowerkit sprung to the top of the fence, and after quickly scanning the yard it contained for any dangers, he sat down facing the opposite way. Rows of fenced-in yards stretched in front of him. There was a slight chill to the air, but it was peaceful. He was safe for the moment. Flowerkit closed his eyes and took a deep breath, letting all of the tension in his muscles slowly melt away.

So here he was, in a strange new place, being sheltered by strangers until the snow season (what he assumed was the kittypet word for leaf-bare) came and passed. He seemed so far from Ashenbird and

the rest of ThunderClan. Flowerkit missed his mother terribly. He wanted to go back. Had escaping from Mosskit and the others been worth it?

Flowerkit's claws scraped the top of the fence. The thought of the other ThunderClan kits still sent spikes of anger shooting through him. He wanted to get back at them, make them pay for all of the pain and misery they had put him through. He wanted to be strong enough to take revenge, to not have to run away from his problems or hide behind the bigger cats. Maybe by the time snow season was over... He could go back. Return to his clan and to Ashenbird. If the last few days were anything to go by, Flowerkit would grow stronger anyways, probably faster than the other kits who were still being babied in the nursery. Or were they? Maybe Mosskit and Acornkit were apprentices by now.

Flowerkit sighed. If he was honest with himself, he just wanted a few days to rest and not have to fight dogs or foxes or other cats for his survival. He wondered if the cats of the band really would accept him, or if he would have to fight to stay there, too.

He'd been mulling over these thoughts for a few good, long minutes when a quiet voice broke into his reflections.

"Hello."

Flowerkit's head jerked sideways and his muscles tensed, ready to run. He relaxed slightly when he saw that it was just a young she-cat, only barely bigger than himself. Her fur was a pale gray with white underfur, and her eyes were a kind shade of light green. A thin band of yellow material was fastened around her neck. The she-cat leapt lightly up to stand beside him on the fence.

"Er... hi," Flowerkit meowed warily.

The young she-cat smiled at him. "I've never seen you around before. Are you new here?"

"Yeah, kinda," Flowerkit responded. He still didn't know what she wanted. "Um... Why are you here?"

"Well, this is my house," she answered with an amused purr, flicking her tail to gesture at the twoleg den behind them.

Flowerkit jumped up. "Oh! Sorry--I can leave."

"No, it's okay!" the gray and white kitten said compassionately, motioning for him to stay. "I'm Mitzy. What's your name?"

Flowerkit cautiously sat back down. This was his least favorite question. "I... I don't have one."

Mitzy tilted her head. "That's silly," she accused. "Everyone has a name."

"Well, okay. My name's Flowerkit. But don't call me that."

"Why not? I like it. It's a cute name."

He stifled a growl. "Yeah, well, I hate it!"

Mitzy frowned and sat down, curling her tail around her paws. "What part don't you like? Flower or Kit?"

"I hate both," the black tom informed her.

"Well then, what do I call you?"

Flowerkit hissed. "I don't care. Call me whatever you want. Just not that."

Mitzy's eyes brightened. Apparently she was really going to come up with something else to call him. "Well, your fur is really dark. What about Blackie?"

"That," Flowerkit said, tail lashing, "might actually be even stupider than Flowerkit."

Hurt showed in Mitzy's eyes for a brief heartbeat, but it was gone just as quickly as it had appeared. "Okay... Let's see, what else is dark?" Her gaze drifted sideways as she thought, then suddenly her whole face lit up with an idea. "Ooh! I know! Can I call you Dusk?"

"Sure, whatever," Flowerkit huffed with a dismissive flick of his tail, although he was secretly pleased. Dusk didn't sound half-bad; it might actually be cool.

Mitzy beamed. "Well then, nice to meet you, Dusk. So what brings you to my fence?"

Flowerkit paused to consider his answer before replying. "I just wanted to find somewhere quiet to think, I guess. Get used to the twolegplace."

"So you are new!" Mitzy concluded triumphantly. "I knew it! No one around here has fur that messy."

Flowerkit bared his teeth. "Why does everyone keep saying that? There's nothing wrong with my pelt!"

"It's filthy," Mitzy countered.

"Grooming is a kittypet thing to do," Flowerkit grumbled. At least, that was what Jake had told him.

"No, it's what any *respectable* cat does," Mitzy protested. "Here, let me help you." Before Flowerkit could react, she had moved towards him and was licking his shoulder.

Flowerkit stiffened and jerked back. "What are you doing?"

"Grooming you," the gray kitten responded in a scolding tone of voice. "Sit still." She continued lapping at his fur, trying to clean it.

"No, stop it," Flowerkit complained, but Mitzy ignored him, and finally the black tom relented and let the she-kit groom his fur. The act reminded him a bit of Ashenbird, when she would wash him every evening before they went to sleep, and he gradually relaxed under Mitzy's attentions.

"What's that thing around your neck for?" Flowerkit asked eventually, while Mitzy was dutifully washing his forehead. The she-kit paused in her grooming to look down at it.

"It's my collar," she replied. "It shows that I have a living."

Flowerkit straightened up. "What does that mean? I heard some of the other cats mention livings. What is that?"

"It's what the street cats call having a house and twolegs taking care of you," Mitzy answered. "From what I know, at lot of cats consider it to be an insult to their independence--although that doesn't stop them from taking food from twolegs." She giggled.

The two kits chatted for a while longer, talking about the twolegplace and the quirkiness of the cats that lived there. Flowerkit ended up telling her a bit about his home, too. Mitzy seemed to like the idea of clans where everyone took care of each other.

The sun was starting to go down when Flowerkit stood and stretched. "I should probably get going," he meowed. "I don't want to try finding my way around in the dark."

"Okay," Mitzy replied with an amiable smile. "Come back soon, Dusk."

Flowerkit promised he would, then leapt down from the fence and started his way back. Before he turned the corner, he glanced back at Mitzy, but the gray and white kitten was gone from the fence top. Flowerkit shook his head and kept going.

It didn't take him long to get back to the band's alleyway. Munchie, the white and ginger she-cat, was still lounging at the top of the wall, and Flowerkit wondered if she was acting as a lookout or guard for the band, or if she just really liked that wall. He flicked his tail in greeting at her, but she ignored him, so Flowerkit just shrugged and continued on.

Inside, Romeo and Ham Sandwich were waiting for him. "You're back," Romeo stated with his commonplace smile. "I was hoping you could find your way back easily enough, and it seems I was right." He motioned to himself and Ham with his tail-tip. "We're heading back to our homes now, if you'll be alright staying here with the band."

A thread of worry touched his thoughts, but Flowerkit ignored it.

He nodded to Romeo. "Sure, no problem. Thanks for bringing me here."

"Anytime," Romeo replied cheerfully. "We'll see you again sooner or later. If you need help, don't hesitate to ask." With that, the dark blue tom padded off. Ham Sandwich blinked his wide red eyes at Flowerkit one last time, his expression still unreadable, and then he too was gone, leaving Flowerkit alone with the band.

Flowerkit stood watching the exit for a few long heartbeats, struggling to ignore the worry that was quickly rising in him. Would he be safe here? He suddenly very much wanted to bury his nose into Ashenbird's fur and not look up ever again. But his mother wasn't here. Flowerkit took a deep breath, squashed his anxiety into a little ball that settled at the pit of his stomach, and then turned around to face the cats he would be staying with for the winter.

Only Wink was watching him. The elderly she-cat's eyes sparkled with some emotion - amusement? curiosity? Flowerkit couldn't tell.

"Missing home?" she asked in a kind rumble.

"No," Flowerkit lied. He shuffled his paws and glanced around. "How many cats live here?" There were only about ten in the shelter at the moment, not nearly as many as there had been when he'd first entered.

Wink shrugged and flipped her tail. "Eh, I dunno. Lots come and go."

Flowerkit was thinking of a good reply when a somewhat familiar voice hailed him from behind.

"Aha! I see our forest friend has returned. Welcome back, young tom."

Flowerkit turned to see M.C. Catnip grinning at him. "Hi, M.C," he greeted.

"Greetings," the brown and lilac tom replied. "Well, my tiny new companion, if we are to be spending the snow season together, I must have something to call you. What's your name, young friend?"

Flowerkit was having second thoughts about spending leaf-bare with *this* talkative tom, but he only hesitated for a moment before answering. "Call me Dusk." Mitzy's name for him would work well here.

Catnip's teeth glinted in the dusty light of the setting sun coming in through the windows. "Excellent. Dusk, my new friend, you must come with me to meet the rest of the band."

"Uh- alright," Flowerkit sighed. He hoped the rest of these alley cats weren't as annoying as M.C. Catnip.

"Come on then," the band cat said with an encouraging flick of his tail, and he bounded off towards the closest group of cats. Flowerkit reluctantly followed.

There were four in the group they approached, sitting in a circle with their heads bowed together as though deep in discussion. Flowerkit caught a few words one was saying before M.C. interrupted them.

"...spitty she-cats drove them away again-"

"Hello!" M.C. called cheerfully, barging his way into the center of the group with a look in his eyes that showed he knew he was being rude but didn't care. Flowerkit saw irritation flicker in the unfamiliar cats' faces, but it was quickly replaced by curiosity when they saw the kitten standing uncertainly at the fringes of the group.

"You'rethatnewcat," a very thin cream tom meowed, his green eyes widening. His whole body seemed to be vibrating slightly. "IsawyoucomeinwithHamandRomeoandIsawCatnipattackyou. Isittrueyou'restayingforthesnowseason?" He said this all very fast, the words tumbling over one another, and it took Flowerkit a moment to figure out what he'd said.

"Yeah, I'm staying," Flowerkit answered with a nod.

"We'll see about that," a chubby black tom muttered grumpily.

"Dusk, meet Dumpling, Mozart, Pookie, and Chicken Noodle," M.C. Catnip said brusquely, gesturing to each cat as he named them.

"Gentletoms, this is our new young companion Dusk."

The fast-talking cream tom, Chicken Noodle, nodded very intensely with much shaking of his head, while Dumpling just looked grumpy, and Mozart, a thick-furred gray tom with a tuft of fur sticking straight up on his head, just widened his eyes and stared almost fearfully at Flowerkit.

Pookie was the only one who didn't seem interested. He was a very young, light gray tom, and his yellow eyes were cast sorrowfully downwards. He was lying down with his tail curled around him and his forepaws close together. Even M.C. noticed how dejected he looked and asked about it.

"What's got you down, Pooks?"

The young pale-furred tom shifted his mournful gaze to meet M.C. Catnip's bold amber one. "I'm worried about Honey," he said in a very small voice. "She said she was having trouble with the spitties in her neighborhood, and I haven't seen her for almost a week now..."

M.C. brushed aside the concern with a flip of his tail. "Honey's probably just gone and locked herself up inside her living. Those she-cats wouldn't bother with a reputable housecat like her." Pookie, however, didn't seem reassured.

Flowerkit opened his mouth to ask what the "spitties" were, but he too got brushed aside by Catnip as the energetic tom nudged him onward. "Come on, my friend, we've more cats to meet," he said loudly.

"SeeyoulaterDusk," Chicken Noodle called after him, waving his tail frantically. Flowerkit flicked his tail in return and felt he had no choice but to continue following M.C. Catnip.

They'd barely gone more than a few pawsteps when they were cut off by a tall dark tom who stared coldly down at Flowerkit. "Pagoda," Catnip greeted cheerfully.

Flowerkit's eyes widened with recognition and he gave a little gasp.

"I know you! You're the one who saved me from that dog!"

The black cat -- Pagoda -- narrowed his eyes distastefully. "I was hoping not to run into you again. Don't tell me you're staying here?"

"I am, actually," Flowerkit retorted, feeling defiant in the face of those cold yellow eyes.

"You two know each other already, I see! Excellent, excellent," M.C. purred, seeming oblivious to the tension between the two.

Pagoda just scoffed and turned his back on them. "Just stay out of my way," he warned Flowerkit over his shoulder. "You should have gone home while you had the chance, forest cat."

Flowerkit glared after him. For some reason Pagoda reminded him of that ShadowClan queen who had been so rude to him, and yet Flowerkit couldn't help admiring this tom's lean form and commanding aura. Perhaps it had something to do with Pagoda having saved his life.

"Good to see you're making friends already," M.C. commented with a benign smile, and Flowerkit stared. He couldn't detect any trace of sarcasm in M.C.'s voice, but surely he wasn't *that* dim-witted?

Flowerkit had no time to puzzle it out, because a moment later Catnip was sweeping him onwards to meet more cats. He introduced "Dusk" to Fez, a thin Siamese she-cat with large green eyes and, Flowerkit noticed, extremely small paws, Max, the large, friendly orange tom who had been so outspoken when Flowerkit was first brought to the band (and who insisted on talking to them while he lied on his back with his paws in the air), and Snickers, an ugly hairless cat with skin that hung on his body in rolls.

M.C. also mentioned the names of done of the other members and visitors of the band, along with descriptions of the cats so that Flowerkit could recognize them when he met them, but after the first few Flowerkit stopped trying to remember. Finally it seemed that Catnip had named every cat who had ever been in the building, and thankfully left Flowerkit to his own devices.

Flowerkit jumped up on top of one of the boxes stacked haphazardly against the walls and sank down, letting sleep wash over him after yet another exhausting day.